



## Council Puts Museum on Life-Support

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By now, anyone who has been paying any attention knows that the Hi-Desert Nature Museum has been severely cut by the town's budget axe. Staffing is reduced to one and a half employees. This is more than a 50 percent reduction from the previous minimal staff level. Consequently, hours of operation have been cut to three days, and programming and the level of community service provided have been correspondingly reduced.

Probably this isn't what the people of Yucca Valley had in mind when they understood from town pronouncements that the museum's budget would be cut this year. The many residents who voiced their desire — in council meetings, op-ed pieces and in emails to town leaders — for the museum to remain open and to continue serving the community were told not to worry. "The museum isn't going away." Well, if it hasn't exactly gone away, what's left of it is little more than a life-support remnant of what it was.

How many family fun days, special events, receptions, lectures, educational and craft programs, community exhibits and community outreach opportunities will be possible to achieve by a staff of one-and-a-half? Who can buy a souvenir or book or educational toy from the gift shop now that it's been closed and the inventory liquidated? Who can take visiting family and friends to see the exhibit of this community's culture and history on a Sunday, Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday?

Town leaders tell us that the museum's diminishment is the fault of economic hardships affecting all of Yucca Valley's operations. "Expenses must be cut," they cried. Yet, within this maelstrom of economic hardship, the council took on maintenance obligations for two city sports parks that will, by town estimates, add about \$200,000-plus of annual, new costs to the town's budget.

Despite how town leaders might try to massage the message, there is a fundamental redistributive reality here that can't be disguised. The council took on a \$200,000-plus burden in parks maintenance when it presumably didn't have the money to pay for it. Correspondingly, the museum's budget for this next year gets reduced by more than half, along with hefty cuts to the Community Services Department in general.

This is perhaps a good time to remind residents of a professional community assessment that was conducted here in 2008 by consultants hired to develop Yucca Valley's Parks Master Plan. The assessment consisted in an industry-standard survey of Yucca Valley

residents. Its results showed that two to four percent of respondents ranked public parks and other youth/sports facilities as their “most used facility.”

In contrast, the survey revealed that 42 percent of respondents ranked the combination of community center, senior center and museum as their “most used facility.” In another category, a full 30 percent of respondents identified themselves as moderate (2-24 visits per year) users of the museum.

Will the community really gain enough from the sports parks to justify the museum’s dismantlement? Has community value truly been well served?

Another decision made by council during the budget process could have helped the museum, but didn’t. Once the budget was completed, the Town Manager reported that, after all the hacking and slashing, there was a \$181,000 surplus. He asked the council how the surplus should be used.

Council members decided to direct this money into infrastructure use where, by town management estimate, the needs run to the tens of millions. Whereas infrastructure needs are important, \$181,000 won’t make much difference. However, even half that amount could have made all the difference to the museum. It could have paid for enough staffing to keep the doors open and maintain the facility’s valuable service to this community.