



SHAKING THE TREES



Tamarisk trees separate the Crossley Tract from the Tahquitz Creek Golf Course. PHOTOS BY JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN



There are disagreements over when and why the trees were planted.

“You are looking at an issue that is expensive and totally unnecessary.”

Paul Bernstein
Mountain Shadows resident, in an email to City Council

Column of tamarisks spurs debate on aesthetics, racism

Corinne S Kennedy Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

When Palm Springs officials vowed to remove a row of tamarisk trees between the Crossley Tract and the 14th fairway of the Tahquitz Creek Golf Course, many of the neighborhood’s residents cheered the decision.

But across the fairway, residents of the Mountain Shadows condo complex were shocked and have since expressed concerns about the cost of removal, the aesthetics of the golf course and their property values.

The trees have been the topic of heated discussions recently after residents of the Crossley Tract, traditionally an African American neighborhood but now much more diverse,

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called on the city to remove the massive foliage wall, saying the tamarisk row was planted decades ago to block the black residents from view.

At an informal meeting with neighborhood residents on December 17, Palm Springs Mayor Rob Moon, City Council member J.R. Roberts and other city officials promised to remove the trees, along with a chain link fence that was added along the Crossley Tract in the 1970s, at an estimated cost of about \$170,000.

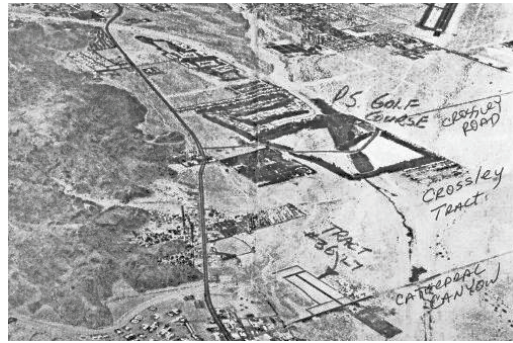
The condo owners across the fairway, who have enjoyed the view of the tamarisk trees from across the green, are opposed to the move.

In addition to their property values decreasing, some are worried that children and dogs from the Crossley Tract will run across the golf course and into their neighborhood. Others said they simply liked the look of the tamarisks and didn't want to see the trees go.

They've also raised a variety of questions about who exactly planted the trees, and when. Some residents said they believe the trees were planted by the tract's developer, Lawrence Crossley, as a windbreak to protect the neighborhood's homes (although the bushy tamarisk trees appear nowhere else along the course or on the other sides of the neighborhood).

Crossley residents say they believe the reason is clear: the developers who owned the parcel that is now the Tahquitz Creek Golf Course wanted to hide the tract, one of two historically African American neighborhoods in the city.

The land the trees were planted on was not part of the Crossley Tract and now belongs to the city, which is why the dispute could ultimately be played out at Palm Springs City Hall, where the City Council still must vote on the fate of the



This undated photograph shows an aerial view of the Crossley Tract and the land that would become the Tahquitz Creek Golf Course.

COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

tamarisks.

In the midst of the discord, Mountain Shadows residents say they are now being unfairly labeled as racist for questioning when and why the trees were planted and voicing opposition to their removal.

Resident Paul Bernstein said he thought the city's decision to remove the trees was too hasty and city officials hadn't done enough research.

"They jumped the gun and said 'racist,' " he said.

Bernstein and other residents said they only learned about the city's plans to remove the trees after reading about it in the newspaper. In an email to all five City Council members, which Bernstein shared with The Desert Sun, he said the trees were not planted for racist reasons and asked why the council was making it a "black issue."

"You just got the sales tax raised to cover the stretched out budget. You are looking at an issue that is expensive and totally unnecessary," he wrote in the email. "Honestly, where is the money coming from?"

Renee Brown of the Palm Springs Historical Society said it was unclear exactly when the trees were planted and that the society didn't wade into politically sensitive issues. Brown provided The Desert Sun with an undated aerial photograph

of the area.

The photo shows the area that would become the Tahquitz Creek Golf Course and the Crossley Tract. Much of what is now the course is surrounded by a dark border, appearing to be trees or bushes. That border, which no longer exists, also appears to run along the west side of the Crossley Tract in the photo.

A second photograph originally thought to show the Crossley Tract showed a different neighborhood. Crossley bought the tract in 1956 and he and his wife became the first residents to move in, in September of 1958.

The land that became the Tahquitz Creek Golf Course was purchased by Palm Springs Capital Company on behalf of the Palm Springs Turf Club in 1955 with the intent to build a horse racing track. Those plans fell through in 1958 after the club could not secure a necessary state permit.

The land was transferred from the turf club to Westview Development in 1958. At the time, Frank Bogert was president of the turf club and vice president of Westview.

The first stages of construction on the course began in July of that year, according to Desert Sun articles from the time. Palm Springs purchased the course from developer Westview Development in

February 1959. Bogert was also mayor of Palm Springs at the time.

The first nine holes were completed and opened for play in October 1959.

Despite disagreements about when and why the trees were planted, residents of the Crossley Tract and Mountain Shadows have agreed on one thing: the city has failed to maintain them. Some Mountain Shadows residents said the city should explore a compromise over the next year, trimming the trees to 6 feet high, clearing debris from around the trees and maintaining them, rather than removing them, to see if that addresses some of the issues raised by Crossley Tract residents.

About 15 Mountain Shadows residents met with The Desert Sun Wednesday. Dianne Sherman said the complex was a diverse and welcoming community. She said the racial tone the debate over the trees has taken on was upsetting and unfair.

"I felt it was personal," Sherman said.

Resident Ric Thomas said he was concerned that the city had no long-term plan and was moving ahead too quickly.

"I don't think the trees should be removed," he said. "But if they are, it should be after a plan is made and funding is in place."

At the meeting with Crossley residents earlier this month, City Council member Roberts and Mayor Moon said taking out the trees was a "first step" and they would address other issues, including the possibility of constructing a privacy wall and planting new trees, later.

City Manager David Ready previously estimated tree removal costs at close to \$170,000. Any expenditure of more than \$20,000 has to be approved by the full council, so the issue will come up at future meetings for discussion and public comment.

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