

## Seniors Short Changed? The Desert Hot Springs Senior Center



### ***Administrated by Outsiders – Local Services Shut Out***

*Desert Hot Springs, CA* – In February 2011 the contact for operating the city's senior center, formerly operated by city personnel, was awarded to an out-of-town service provider from Moreno Valley, an hour's drive away.

Another contractor, located in the city and equally experienced in providing identical services, was not awarded the contract even though costs were essentially equal.

**Family Services Association (FSA)** of Moreno Valley won the two-year \$230,000 contract as a result of the city council relying on a staff report recommending approval. The contract was quietly passed as an agenda item conveniently buried in the consent calendar. There was no council discussion in awarding the contract.



Jason Simpson

Jason Simpson of Temecula

Cards were stacked against the local organization – and local hiring – by City Finance Director Jason Simpson, who lives in Temecula. Simpson was a key player in awarding the contract to the Moreno Valley organization as he had a heavy hand in the decision.

Simpson served in a leadership position as one of three people on the recommending committee. Simpson was the sole author of the staff report recommending the Moreno Valley company get the contract, edging out the Desert Hot Springs company.

## FSD of Desert Hot Springs

Although names are similar, **Family Services of the Desert** is a service provider totally separate and unrelated to Family Services Association.

FSD, located on Palm Drive in the Vons Shopping Center of Desert Hot Springs, has a long history of providing community services. It was established in 1959. Last year FSD merged with Food Now to increase the efficiency of providing community services. For more... [www.familyservicesofthedesert.org](http://www.familyservicesofthedesert.org)

The Desert Hot Springs organization boasts an exemplary track record comparative to that of the Moreno Valley operation. However, there are considerable benefits to hiring local.

Executive Director of FSD, John Brown, said he hires many city residents and that all employees of the non-profit organization live in the Coachella Valley. FSD also has a local board of directors.

## FSA of Moreno Valley

FSA, by contrast, is administered by staff in Moreno Valley. No one from the city of Desert Hot Springs or from the Coachella Valley serves on their board of directors. Their website [www.fsaca.org](http://www.fsaca.org) specifically states the organization serves western Riverside County. The city of Desert Hot Springs is in eastern Riverside County.

## No Discussion and No Fiscal Impact

Simpson's seven point evaluation was critical of the local city organization, writing he was "not sure they understand the customer they will serve."

One is left to wonder if it may be only Simpson himself suffering a lack of understanding with what FSD does, or is capable of, due to his living in Temecula causing his uncertainty with services and service providers in the city that employs him.

The "Discussion" section of Simpson's 400 word report reads more like a press release praising FSA. Simpson mentions not one word about the city's own Desert Hot Springs service provider, only praising the benefits of using the out of town organization with a couple choice examples of FSA's contract history.

When performing cost analysis Simpson did the job he knows best, as he is paid handsomely for his economic expertise and administration duties. Simpson also holds the title of Assistant City Manager as well as serving as the chief financial officer for the city.

Simpson simply noted in the "Fiscal Impact" section of his report that the city "had the funds available" and made no mention, not one word, of the comparative costs of the two service providers or the benefits of using local contractors.

While the Moreno Valley organization is obviously pleased to service the nearly quarter million dollar contract, not everyone in Desert Hot Springs is pleased with the way things are.

"The contract for Senior Center services has a provision that allows the city council to reopen the contract for a second look." said councilman Russell Betts. "It appears this is a case where the council should take a second look to make sure it got this one right. I'll be putting in a request to the city manager for additional details."

## Not Shopping Local

Although Desert Hot Springs passed a Shop Local Ordinance in 2008 aimed at giving advantages to local

businesses by assisting local employment and encouraging spending predominantly in the Coachella Valley and especially in the city, city staff administering city contracts have repeatedly ignored the ordinance and the city council has not held staff accountable for their failures.

The city's local service organization was to receive a 5% bid advantage. This was never taken into account by the city finance director nor mentioned anywhere in Simpson's fiscal analysis.

The fifteen page proposal submitted by the local service provider differs in several respects from the eight page proposal from the out of town provider. Most importantly the proposal submitted by FSD provides a transportation component. The Moreno Valley proposal does not.

## 2 Proposals – 1 With Transportation

The total annual operating contract proposal submitted by FSD was \$158,973.87. The amount proposed by FSA was \$115,000.00. When the transportation element is removed, the proposals are virtually the same cost.

Still, transportation remains a vital consideration. When the city was the prior operator, staff used private vehicles transporting some seniors to and from the facility. The current Senior Center operator does not provide that service, leaving some seniors, who formerly made use of the Senior Center, no way to use city facilities.

## Not All Seniors Are Happy

"A van could take us places," said Rita, a regular at the Senior Center. "Just a field trip every once in a while would be nice for those of us who don't drive anymore."

An alternative transportation for some seniors has emerged from the private sector.

A few of the small extended care nursing homes in the city are providing shuttles to the Senior Center, transferring their board and care seniors to the city facility in order to provide some much needed off-time for their own staff. Seniors enjoy free meals – a relief for these private sector service providers.

## Advisory Council Mystery

It's not been easy getting information from the current operators of the Senior Center. Program Director of the Senior Center Erin Begley remains tight lipped. The FSA contract specifically states the agency will appoint/hire a qualified individual for the job. Begley refused to provide any background information about her work history or academic qualifications.

A key element of the Moreno Valley proposal appears to have been ignored.

A Senior Center Advisory Council was required to be established by FSA composed of "clients, local residents and other public private agency providers who are key stakeholders in the provision of services to seniors in the community." The purpose of the Advisory Council was "to insure that facility operations are high quality and that the facility operations are completed accurately and efficiently."

The problem is no one – in Desert Hot Springs or Moreno Valley – seems to know anything about any Senior Center Advisory Council, if it exists, who serves on it, or if it has ever had even one meeting during the entire year the Moreno Valley organization has been operating in Desert Hot Springs.

"We have fulfilled our contract." said FSA Program Director Shannon Gonzalez. When asked about the Advisory Council Gonzalez said, "I can't tell you about Desert Hot Springs."

"I don't have any information about the Advisory Council there," said Veronica Dover, FSA Chief Operating Officer "We don't have any problems. The city is happy with us." Dover is the immediate supervisor of Gonzalez and author of the FSA proposal specifically identifying the Advisory Council as a key element of local accountability.

[Senior Center Evaluation](#)

[FSA Proposal](#)

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*Jason Simpson photo by Robert Montgomery*



## [Dean Gray](#)

Publisher and one of the writers for the Desert Star Weekly, the California desert's #1 and only alternative independent weekly newspaper. Dean started in the newspaper business at age nine, delivering the weekly Shopping News in Long Beach, California. He wrote, published and sold ads for his first independent newspapers in 1969 while in high school and has been writing ever since. Art Kunkin, then publisher of the LA Free Press and now of Joshua Tree, was then and remains now his inspiration and a weekly columnist in the Star. While Dean's "cactus thorns" can be sharp and pointed, he has a passion for art, music, good food and healthy living. See [www.desertstarweekly.com/who-we-are](http://www.desertstarweekly.com/who-we-are) for more.

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