



Staff Report

City Council

Item No. 6.B

Meeting Date: April 23, 2025

From: Ryan Hunt, Communications & Events Manager

Title: Approval of Contract for Annual Hot Air Balloon Festival

RECOMMENDATION:

To approve a three-year contract agreement with SoundSkilz as the selected vendor for the 2025-2027 Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival.

BACKGROUND:

On January 24, 2025, the City of Cathedral City issued a request for proposals (RFP) seeking qualified professional special event production companies to plan and implement the Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival. The RFP was posted on the City's website and distributed to potential vendors. This is the first time that the City has bid out the operation of this event since its inception.

The Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival is a signature three-day event held annually in November, the weekend before Thanksgiving. Since its inception in 2015, the festival has grown from several thousand local attendees to over 25,000 regional visitors, generating significant tourism impact for the greater Palm Springs region.

The event features hot air balloon launches, competitions, and evening balloon glows. The festival opens each morning with sunrise balloon launches and competitions visible across the valley. Festival grounds include live entertainment, food vendors, a beer and wine garden, and an artisan market. Special activities include tethered balloon rides (weather permitting), family entertainment zones, and headline musical performances.

The RFP schedule included the following key dates:

- Deadline to receive unique questions from submitters: February 14, 2025
- Posting of answers to unique questions: February 20, 2025
- Proposal submission deadline: March 7, 2025, at 2:00 p.m.

The City Council approved SoundSkilz as the selected vendor for the Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival at the April 9, 2025, regular meeting, providing Communications & Events with a two-week window to negotiate a contract agreement with

SoundSkilz as the third-party operator/producer of the event.

DISCUSSION:

The City received four (4) proposals for the Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival by the submission deadline. Proposals were submitted by:

- SoundSkilz
- Revel Republic
- Fantasy Balloon Flights
- JJ-LA

An evaluation panel consisting of the following members conducted a thorough review of all proposals:

- Ryan Hunt, Communications & Events Manager (lead)
- Chris Parman, Events Consultant and 2025 LGBTQ+ Days event producer
- Adam Chastain, Events & Recreation Coordinator
- Colleen Pace, Chief Sales & Marketing Officer with Visit Greater Palm Springs
- Erin Hyland, Parks & Community Events Commission Chair

Each proposal was evaluated based on the following criteria as outlined in the RFP:

- Past production experience
- Quality of event productions
- Size of event experience
- Promotional marketing communications plan
- Festival implementation plan
- Booking entertainment abilities
- Experience working with state and/or local government staff
- Budgeting experience
- Community involvement or ability to network with volunteer groups and/or charities

The evaluation committee scored each proposal on a scale of 1-100. The average scores were as follows:

1. SoundSkilz - 92.2
2. Revel Republic - 89.0
3. JJ-LA - 85.8
4. Fantasy Balloon Flights - 76.6

SoundSkilz received the highest average score of 92.2 points. The committee found that SoundSkilz demonstrated superior qualifications and experience in all categories, particularly in:

1. Event Production Experience: SoundSkilz has extensive experience producing large-scale events, including hot air balloon festivals and other major community events.
2. Marketing & Promotion Plan: Their comprehensive marketing strategy included innovative digital marketing approaches, traditional media outreach, and strategic partnerships with regional tourism entities.

3. Implementation Plan: Their detailed festival implementation plan addressed all key aspects of the event, including balloon operations, entertainment programming, vendor management, and safety protocols.
4. Government Experience: SoundSkilz has successfully worked with multiple municipal governments on similar events throughout Southern California, including Cathedral City.

A standout element of SoundSkilz's proposal is their partnership with Carol Popejoy-Davis, who has been hired as a consultant for this project. Ms. Popejoy-Davis served as the Executive Director of the Temecula Valley Balloon & Wine Festival for 17 years. Under her leadership, that festival grew into one of Southern California's premier events, attracting over 40,000 attendees annually and generating significant economic impact for the Temecula region. Her extensive experience in balloon operations, safety protocols, vendor management, and entertainment booking adds considerable value and specialized expertise to the SoundSkilz team.

After thorough negotiation and comprehensive research into projected costs and expenditures for the Cathedral City Hot Air Balloon Festival, Communications & Events is recommending an increase from \$145,000 to \$175,000 as the base contract amount for year one, with annual 5% increases for subsequent years. This adjustment allows for expanded programming while ensuring fiscal responsibility. To accommodate this change, we propose transferring \$11,000 from Tastes & Sounds of Cathedral City budget and an additional \$19,000 from the Communications & Events Professional Services Budget for FY 2025-2026.

This strategic realignment includes a free Tastes and Sounds of Cathedral City community concert on Friday, November 21, 2025, featuring Radio Ready and Queen Nation, replacing the previously scheduled November 25 date which falls too close to the Thanksgiving holiday. With the City taking on Friday night's entertainment, it will allow the event operator more flexibility to focus investment in other key areas of the festival and maintain our high quality and standards our residents and visitors have come to expect from our signature and longest lasting festival. For FY 2026-2027, we will continue with the \$11,000 transfer from Tastes & Sounds Fall Series along with \$19,750 from the Communications & Events Professional Services budget, and for FY 2027-2028, we will maintain the \$11,000 transfer from Tastes & Sounds Fall Series with \$28,938 from Communications & Events Professional Services budget.

Our November Taste and Sounds Fall Series programming includes the November 4 event with DJ Aron as a Palm Springs Pride themed lead-up, which we are working to establish as an official Pride kickoff event through sponsorship agreements. The November 11 Tastes & Sounds will be a Veterans Day cookout themed night with military-themed performances from the Cathedral City High School Jazz Band, saving on costs as they request a modest donation compared to professional entertainment. Importantly, DJ Aron has already been paid for through LGBT+ Days as a rescheduled performance. This integrated approach creates a month-long celebration with The Dreamboats performing at the amphitheater on November 18, 2025, to launch the festival week, followed by a Media Preview Day at Century Park on Thursday, November 20, 2025. Throughout all November events, we will maintain sponsorship visibility and operate information booths to maximize cross-promotion opportunities and community engagement. With the 5% annual increases, the three-year

funding structure will be:

- FY 2025-2026: \$175,000,
- FY 2026-2027: \$183,750; and
- FY 2027-2028: \$192,938.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The fiscal impact of this three-year agreement with SoundSkilz for the Cathedral City Hot Air Balloon Festival will be distributed as follows: For FY 2025-2026 (covering the November 2025 event), \$175,000 will be funded by transferring \$11,000 from the Tastes & Sounds of Cathedral City Fall Series budget and \$19,000 from the Communications & Events Professional Services budget, with the remaining \$145,000 from the existing allocation. For FY 2026-2027 (covering the November 2026 event), \$183,750 will be funded by transferring \$11,000 from the Tastes & Sounds Fall Series and \$19,750 from Communications & Events Professional Service budget, with the remaining \$153,000 from the existing allocation. The final year of the agreement (covering the November 2027 event) will require \$192,938, which represents the 5% increase for the third year of the contract.

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN:

This action supports Goal F-3: Promote additional community events and celebrations.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Cathedral City Balloon Festival Contract for Services - 2025-2027