



Staff Report

City Council

Item No. 5.C

Meeting Date: April 9, 2025

From: Ryan Hunt, Communications & Events Manager

Title: Preliminary Contract Award for Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival

RECOMMENDATION:

To approve SoundSkilz as the selected vendor for the Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival based on the evaluation panel's scoring and recommendation.

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.

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.

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 LGBT+ 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
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governments on similar events throughout Southern California.

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.

Following City Council approval, staff will work with SoundSkilz to negotiate and finalize specific contract terms, timelines, deliverables, and payment schedules. These negotiations will ensure that the final agreement aligns with the City's budget constraints while maximizing the festival's potential impact and success. The finalized Contract for Services Agreement will be presented to City Council at a future meeting for review and approval.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The fiscal year 2026-27 biennial budget includes funding for the Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival.

Additional revenue is anticipated from sponsorships, vendor fees, and other sources as outlined in the proposed budget submitted by SoundSkilz. The final revenue projections and detailed budget will be finalized during contract negotiations and presented to Council with the finalized agreement.

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN:

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

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Sample Contract for Services Agreement
2. RFP for Cathedral City International Hot Air Balloon Festival
3. Special Events Proposal Scoring Summary