

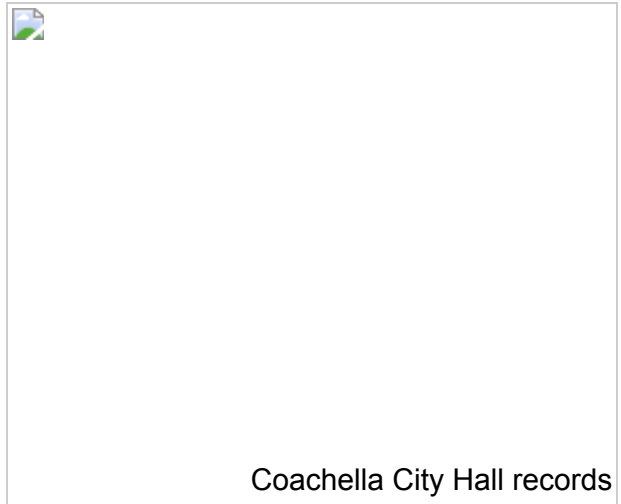
CALIFORNIA WILL TAKE YOUR HOME AWAY FROM YOU AT THE DROP OF A HAT!

This California City Is Threatening a Family Over Property Fines Sent to a Dead Woman at the Wrong Address

An already awful practice of trying to use code violations as a revenue stream gets truly grotesque.

Scott Shackford |

Not even your death will keep the government of Coachella, California, from trying to nickel-and-dime you out of every last cent. Just ask the family of Marjorie Sansom, who died in 2016 at age 91.



The city levied thousands of dollars in fines on the woman due to code violations on a lot she abandoned. It tried to collect them by mailing bills to an empty house where she hadn't lived for years. Samson, meanwhile, was suffering from dementia and being cared for by her family, which says it never received any of those mailings.

Now the city is demanding that the family cough up \$39,000 to cover the back fines and to pay for the cleanup for the empty lot. That's more than the value of the property itself.

Worse still, officials are being dismissive of evidence that the city knew its complaints were not reaching the woman or her family. The government just wants its money.

The whole outrageous story was carefully **investigated and reported** by Brett Kelman of the Palm Springs *Desert Sun*. It's a follow-up to a heavily researched piece he published in November, which documented how Coachella and a private legal firm the city had contracted with were **abusing code enforcement regulations to extract huge sums from property owners**. The city would cite property owners for typical code violations, like having damaged property or for unapproved home upgrades. Months later, the property owners would get massive bills from the legal firm, charging them for the cost of prosecuting them in the first place.

That law firm, Silver & Wright, is in the thick of the Sansom case. It sent the woman invoices (still mailed to the wrong address) demanding thousands of dollars in fines, court fees (even though there were no court hearings), prosecution fees (nobody was prosecuted), and reimbursement to the city for the time spent cleaning up the lot.

In Kelman's story, neither the city nor the law firm shows any signs of worry that they've gone too far. Despite threatening this family with liens of thousands of dollars for fines they didn't even know existed, the city and the firm insist they're doing everything above the board:

When asked to comment on the Sansom's property this month, Coachella officials and a city attorney said that they were unaware of the owner's advanced age, mental state, true address or death at any point during the nuisance property case, but still stood by the actions taken by the city. Luis Lopez, Coachella's development services director, said the city presumed the citations and legal notices it had mailed to Sansom were received—even though they were notified twice by the U.S. Postal Service that the documents were sent to a vacant house.

Lopez also defends holding Sansom's heirs responsible for her debt, saying her legal guardian should have been maintaining her land and that funds collected from the lien would "go towards

replenishing the public's money" that was spent to inspect and clean her property. After The Desert Sun noted that a majority of Sansom's debt came from punitive fines, which are not reimbursement of public money, Lopez said the family should still pay because of their negligence.

"The city believes these fines are justified in this case due to the willful, or at least reckless, disregard for the public safety of the community which includes an elementary school as evidenced by the nuisance on the property," Lopez wrote in an email statement.

"Additionally, the fines are justified because there was no 'good faith' effort by the owners or successors in interest to contact the city, pay part of the citations or abate the nuisance."

Reminder: The family says they never saw the citations because they were sent to an abandoned house, not to them. Kelman even has a photo of the certified letter that was returned to the city, informing them that the address they were mailing was vacant. The family found what has happened from the *Desert Sun* itself, which tracked the family down while investigating the city's use of the law firm.

Speaking of the firm, Kelman tracked down Curtis Wright, one of the firm's partners. Wright insisted that the firm and the city did its due

diligence to track the woman down. Then he presented this whopper of a quote:

The city doesn't have funds to do a manhunt for everybody who has a code enforcement case on their property. Cities don't have investigative reporters on payroll to find investment property owners.

He's arguing that the City of Coachella (2017–18 budget: **\$22 million**) and his law firm that bills people for thousands of dollars lacks the investigative resources of a Palm Springs newspaper with a daily circulation of 50,000.

Read the sordid story [here](#). Kelman reports that both the Institute for Justice and the American Civil Liberties Union have denounced Coachella's behavior.

Photo Credit: Coachella City Hall Records