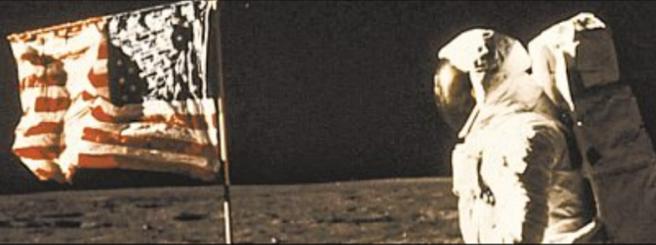


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# The Desert Sun

SUNDAY, AUGUST 26, 2012

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**iSun** Investigation: Wastewater funds

## City siphoned off sewer plant millions

Critics: Palm Springs' accounting moves circumvented law putting monies off limits

By **Keith Matheny**  
and **Mariecar Mendoza**

The Desert Sun

PALM SPRINGS — City voters in November 1999 made their will clear, passing a ballot initiative that

forbade Palm Springs officials from using wastewater treatment funds for any other city purpose.

But the use of the wastewater plant as an ATM continued nearly unabated for years since then through what one former City Council member,

Jim Jones, called "smoke-and-mirrors accounting."

The history lesson has relevance today, as the City Council in April approved a sewer rate increase that will incrementally rise through 2031 until the monthly fee reaches \$35, or \$420 annually. That's a more than tripling of the rate, which earlier this year was \$10.36 monthly.

City officials say the extra funds

are needed to help pay for a 20-year wastewater treatment plant capital improvement plan. According to an engineering study, \$67 million in improvements are needed at the plant, with \$55 million of that "high-priority projects (that) cannot be funded by the city's current sewer service rates."

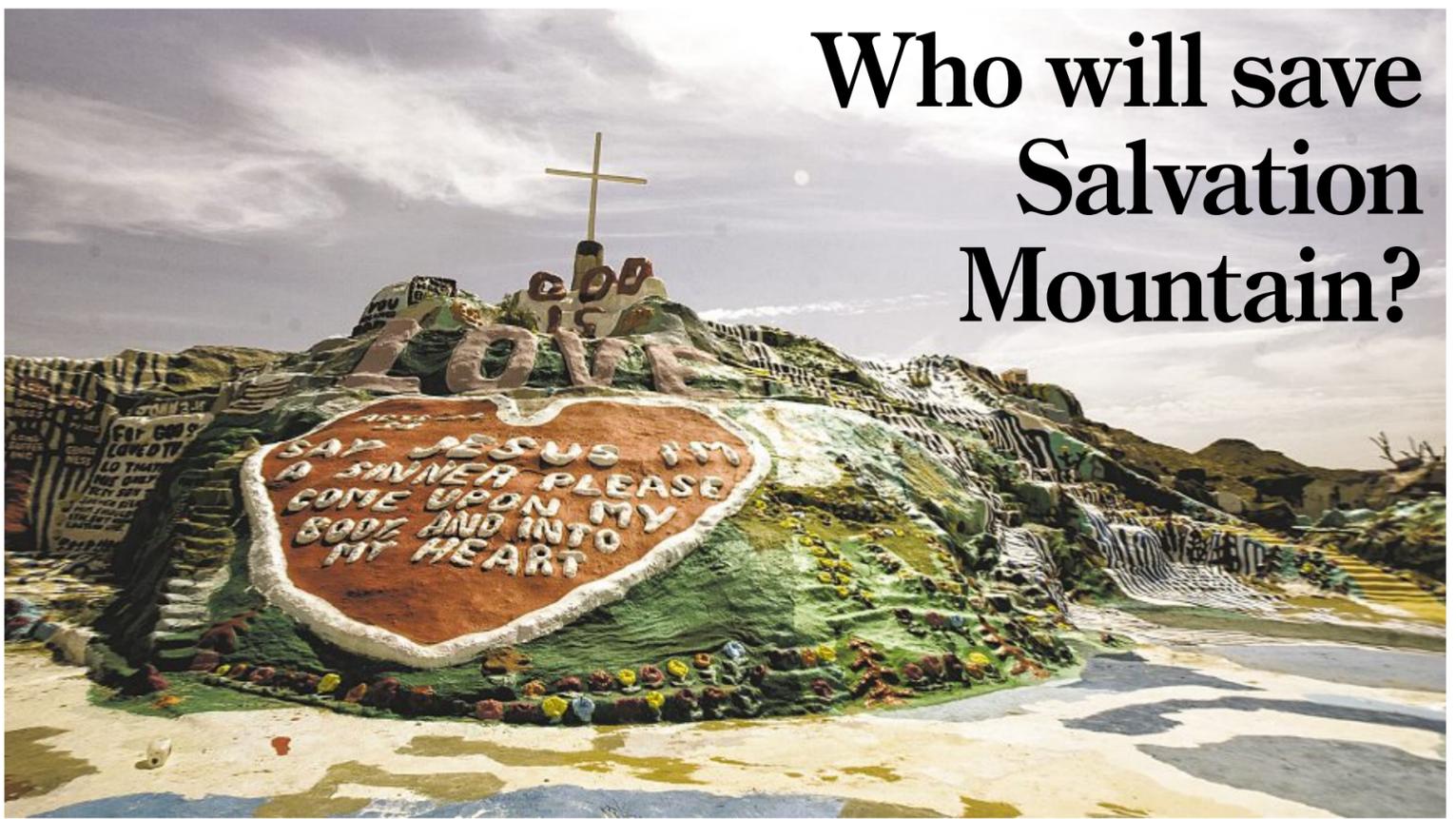
"We're increasing the rates because we have a capital program that

**iSun** Investigations

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has been neglected for years," Assistant City Manager Tom Wilson said.

"It's going to get cleaner, better and  
**Please see PLANT, A13**



## Who will save Salvation Mountain?

Salvation Mountain at Slab City near Niland, 83 miles southeast of Palm Springs, was created by Leonard Knight using adobe poured over a hillside. Knight painted it with psychedelic colors and Bible verses, using about 100,000 gallons of paint in all. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN



Adam Zeek has been looking after Salvation Mountain in Knight's absence. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

## Desert landmark's future in doubt after departure of 80-year-old creator

By **Marcel Honoré**  
The Desert Sun

NILAND — It's a blistering summer day at the edge of civilization.

Adam Zeek emerges alone from a glimmering silver Airstream trailer wearing a straw hat and shades to shield against the sun. He walks a couple hundred feet through the dust, brush and debris to tend to Salvation Mountain.

Life out here is rugged. Zeek, 28, collects a \$250 monthly stipend to care for the site. There's no air conditioning, and the Portland, Ore., native arrived in July during a heat wave where temperatures climbed above 115 degrees.

But for Zeek, it's a labor of love — a chance to preserve the legacy of Leonard Knight, Salvation Mountain's creator. "It's just too important to let it go," he says, studying the eclectic, three-story-tall beacon above him. "There's nothing else like it in the world."

Since its creation 28 years ago, Salvation Mountain has become one of the low desert's most unique and colorful attractions, proclaiming Biblical messages of love and redemption in bright, folk-art acrylics that have welcomed thousands of visitors from across the globe.

But the unofficial adobe monument has faced major challenges in recent months after deteriorating health finally forced the 80-year-old Knight to depart for a care facility in December. Days

**Please see MOUNTAIN, A9**

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### SWEET LIFE

'Sugar Man' gains new audience after film premieres at Sundance. **E1**

### DOG ROAD TRIP

Shelter volunteers will drive more than 60 dogs to Oregon for a better chance at adoption. **B1**

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