



News Articles

Navigating rules of road tricky for golf cart drivers

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by Sonya English

When La Quinta resident Keith Woodcox heard that his city was going to allow golf carts on some public streets, he went shopping.

He splurged, bringing home a \$14,500 cart that is a mini-replica of a Cadillac Escalade. The Palm Desert dealer assured him it met all the requirements for a city permit.

And it does — in Palm Desert. La Quinta, on the other hand, won't give him a permit because it's a four-seater.

“La Quinta has a requirement that only two people can be carried in the golf cart,” he said. “But since my cart can carry four, I cannot register it here.”

As golf carts have grown in popularity, many owners are discovering the overlapping, confusing and contradictory state, county and municipal rules for operating not-quite-cars on public streets.

Four valley cities — Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, La Quinta and Indio — have rules governing the operation of golf carts on city streets.

A permitted golf cart can be driven along streets with speed limits of 25 mph or lower, designated paths and stretches of road with special lanes for golf carts and bicycles.

La Quinta officials said they'd change the rule allowing only two-seat vehicles, but that it's a state decision. Planning director Les Johnson said he couldn't issue a permit for a golf cart like Woodcox's because, by the state's definition, it wasn't a golf cart.



ROBERT SYLK of La Quinta merges into traffic in his registered four-seat golf cart that he often drives to the Ralphs supermarket along Jefferson Street in Indio.

Photo by Richard Lui The Desert Sun

“It wasn't something that the city decided,” Johnson said. “It was a matter of ensuring compliance with the state.”

But as with most bureaucracy, it's not that simple. Ask state officials how many seats are in a golf cart and they'll ask, where is it? On a golf course or golf-cart pathway, Woodcox's vehicle — purchased as a golf cart at a golf-cart dealership — is classified as a golf cart.

“But in order to drive that four-seater on a road, now it's an electric vehicle as far as we're concerned,” said Jan Mendoza, California Department of Motor Vehicles information officer. “Then it has to be registered. It's been kind of an issue of contention in a lot of these communities that surround golf courses.”

It's a contentious issue among city officials as well. Various factors determine when a four-seat golf cart can travel on roads with just a city permit and when it needs to be registered just like a car.

If Woodcox could simply get a permit in La Quinta, it would cost him \$20 for two years. Registered as a car, the state would charge him about \$240 annually.

The hard-and-fast rule given out by information officers from enforcement agencies — the DMV, Riverside County Sheriff's Department and California Highway Patrol — is that a vehicle designed to hold more than two people is no longer a golf cart. It's a “neighborhood electric vehicle,” known as a NEV, or a low-speed vehicle that requires state registration.

So it would follow, then, that four-seat golf carts in Palm Desert with a city permit but no state registration are illegal, right?

To that, Mendoza of the DMV said yes, it sounds like they are illegal.

But Cpl. Courtney Donowho with the Riverside County Sheriff's Department said she didn't think that was the case and referenced several state vehicle codes to piece together why they aren't illegal.

And Palm Desert City Attorney Dave Erwin pointed to a wrinkle in the law that allows four-seat golf carts to drive within one mile of a golf course without state registration when they meet state safety requirements.

“The determination was previously made in Palm Desert in 2008 that all parts of Palm Desert were within one mile of a golf course,” Erwin said.

The more than 400 carts in Palm Desert with two-year, \$10 city permits include carts with two, four and six seats, including its “shopper hoppers” on El Paseo, said city transportation engineer Mark Diercks.

La Quinta has issued 27 permits since its golf-cart program started in May 2010.

“So many restrictions keep people from wanting to do it,” said La Quinta resident Robert Sylk. His four-seat golf cart is registered with the state, which costs him \$140 each year compared to the \$20 he'd pay for a two-year permit with the city.

Les Johnson, the planning director, said more carts like Sylk's would be a welcome sight in the city.

“Any NEV or golf cart, for the most part, they're much more fuel-efficient and you could argue maybe even a little more convenient,” Johnson said.

But, because of state restrictions, the program cannot permit golf carts with more than two seats, Johnson said.

And unlike Palm Desert, there are places in La Quinta that aren't within a mile of a golf course.

Indio just began licensing golf carts in June and only two of its two-year, \$50 permits have been issued.

Information officer Chris Escobedo said the city plans to approve only two-seat golf carts.

If the rules in Palm Desert and La Quinta were black and white, Rancho Mirage would be a shade of gray.

Early last week, Britt Wilson, a management analyst with Rancho Mirage, said the city did not limit the number of seats for golf carts. Upon closer review of state code, he said he'd been mistaken and that his city's program approved only two-seat golf carts. City Attorney Steve Quintanilla confirmed this later.

Golf cart dealers, on the other hand, said they regularly sell four-seaters to Rancho Mirage residents, who have been able to get city permits.

George Thomas, service manager at Electric Car Distributors, and Kimberly Terrazas, manager at Caddyshack in Rancho Mirage, both said a two-seat rule would be new to them.

“Most people in Rancho Mirage do have a four-seater,” Terrazas said.

Caddyshack keeps brochures from each city's golf cart program so sales staff can explain to customers what each city requires.

“We've had customers recently and in the past that have gotten four-seaters that have been approved,” she said.

Wilson said that of the 118 permits Ranch Mirage has issued, the city is “unaware of any four-seaters that have been approved.

“If one were to be identified, we would research the issue and, if not allowed, we would revoke the permit,” he said in an email.

Coachella Valley street regulations, licensing vary from city to city

Golf cart programs by city

Palm Desert

Program started: 1993

Cost: \$10 for two years

Seat limit: None

How to register: Schedule an inspection with code enforcement by calling (760) 346-0611.

La Quinta

Program started: May 2010

Cost: \$20 for two years

Seat limit: Two seats only

How to register: Pick up an application at the Building and Safety Department Code Compliance Division at City Hall, at 78-495 Calle Tampico, visit www.la-quinta.org or call (760) 777-7050

Rancho Mirage

Program started: 1999

Cost: \$10 for two years

Seat limit: Two seats only

How to register: Schedule an inspection by calling City Hall at (760) 324-4511

Indio

Program started: June 2011

Cost: \$50 for two years

Seat limit: Two seats only

How to register: Schedule an inspection by calling the records department of the Indio Police Department at (760) 391-4057, then press 2