

How Hemet could become Riverside County's fourth-largest city

Group wants to annex 34,000 acres that include East Hemet and Diamond Valley, but foes don't want city living



Sean Murphy, Andrew Kotyuk, Debbie Green and Lori VanArsdale stand at the corner of San Jacinto Street and Acacia Avenue, which serves as the border between the city of Hemet and Riverside County land, on Wednesday, June 18, 2025. They're part of a group called Hemet Rising, which wants to annex about 34,000 acres of unincorporated area into the city. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)



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Andrew Kotyuk's dream for Hemet sounds like a nightmare to Jenny Hess.

They're on opposite sides of a plan that would make Hemet the fourth-largest city in Riverside County behind Riverside, Moreno Valley and Corona. [A proposal to annex 34,000 acres](#) of unincorporated county land could boost the city's population by roughly 33% to more than 120,000.

Earlier this year, Kotyuk and other members of Hemet Rising submitted a petition to the [Riverside Local Agency Formation Commission](#) or LAFCO, a

public agency that oversees boundary changes for cities, counties and other public agencies.

According to [Hemet Rising](#), more than 1,500 registered voters in unincorporated areas near Hemet signed the petition, which kicks off a lengthy, complex process over the future of Hemet's city limits.



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From left, Debbie Green, Sean Murphy, Andrew Kotyuk and Lori VanArsdale stand at the corner of San Jacinto Street and Acacia Avenue, the border of the city of Hemet and Riverside County land on Wednesday, June 18, 2025. They're members of Hemet Rising, which wants to annex land into the city in hopes of boosting the quality of life and local control over growth. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

Hemet Rising argues annexation will put Hemet and the San Jacinto Valley on par with its more prosperous neighbors in southwest Riverside County.

“In my eyes, the valley was left behind like Route 66 towns when the interstates were built,” said Kotyuk, a former San Jacinto city councilmember who grew up in the San Jacinto Valley and now lives in an unincorporated area near Hemet.

“Companies left us. Small businesses left us. Everyone moved and all the big attractions (went to) the cities that are doing the annexing and have the highways.”

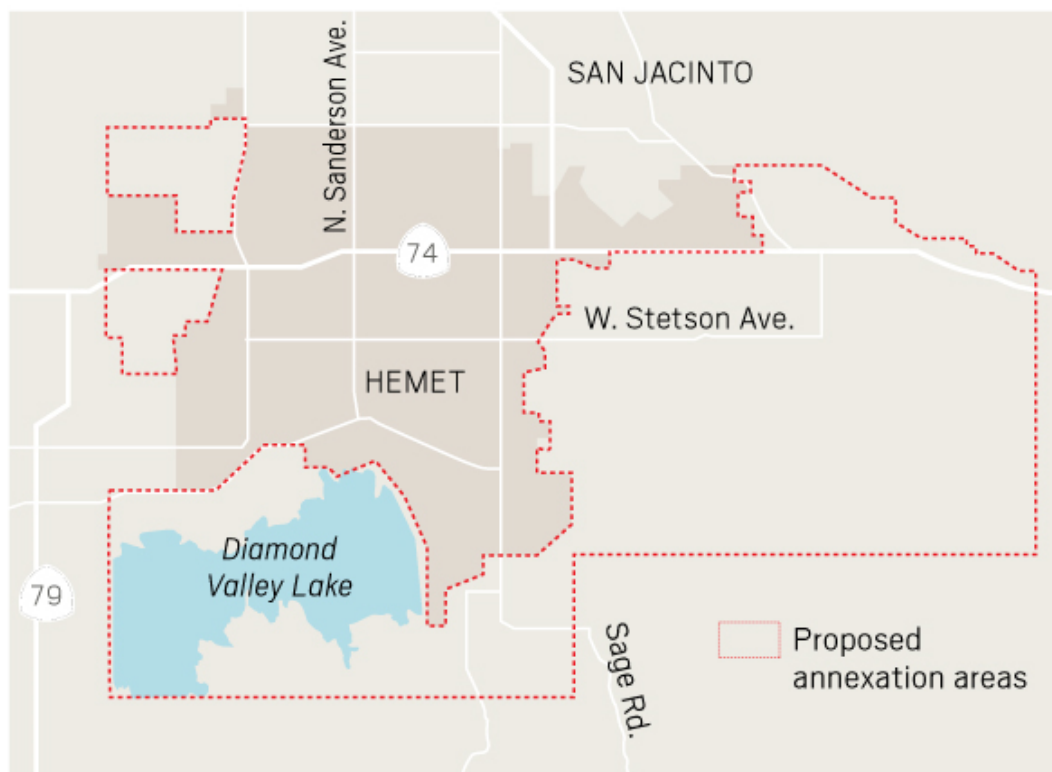
Thirty years ago, “We could attract doctors to this town. We can’t attract people to come buy our high-end real estate anymore,” said Hemet Rising member Debbie Green, a real estate agent who moved to the valley in 1971.

“They get on (the internet) and they see where the culture is, the shopping, everything that they’re looking for, and they say ‘We’re not going to Hemet for that. We’re going to Temecula.’”

In many areas, Hemet, [which incorporated as a city in 1910](#), lags in several ways behind Menifee, Murrieta, Temecula and Wildomar, which all became cities between 1989 and 2008.

A bigger Hemet?

A group called Hemet Rising wants to incorporate about 34,000 acres of Riverside County land into the city of Hemet. The annexation would add roughly 28,000 people to the city, making it the county's fourth largest.



Source: Riverside Local Agency Formation Commission

SCNG

For example, Hemet’s [median household income of \\$52,824](#) is less than half of [Temecula’s](#). About 40% in Temecula have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 16.2% of Hemet residents.

This isn’t the first time Hemet’s been eyed for annexation. A previous effort was led by Keith Garrison, who died in January.

Founded this year, Hemet Rising plans to pick up where that effort left off and borrow studies and other work done for the previous attempt at annexation.

“If you want to cross a river and a bridge is half built, do you build a new bridge, or do you finish building the bridge that’s already built?” Kotyuk said.

Hemet Rising’s plan would incorporate most of Hemet’s [sphere of influence](#), a legal term describing land that could become part of a city. This includes land in East Hemet, Valle Vista, Diamond Valley and Sprague Heights, along with the Ramona Bowl Amphitheatre, site of [the iconic “Ramona” outdoor play](#).

Expanding Hemet would make it more attractive to the businesses people want, Green said.

“Every time you look at social media and you see everybody complain, ‘Hemet doesn’t have this, Hemet doesn’t have that,’” she said. “Well, Hemet’s never going to get those things if we don’t improve our demographic.”

Annexation would not raise property taxes, but redirect tax dollars to the city, Kotyuk said.

“Every new house in Menifee, Murrieta, Temecula, Wildomar, they pay toward public safety,” he said. “They pay toward landscaping on their property taxes.”

While Hemet isn’t spearheading the annexation, it must respond to information requests for those seeking to annex land into the city, Hemet Mayor Jackie Peterson said via email.

According to a [Hemet city report](#) from March, annexation would generate \$14.2 million for the city while costing \$11.1 million in new services, including:

- Forty new employees in the city clerk’s office and other departments
- Ten new police officers
- Fifteen fire department hires
- Two code enforcement officers
- Maintaining 124 miles of unincorporated roads

Many in the proposed annexation zone already “think that they’re in the city,” said Lori VanArdsale, a Hemet Rising member and former Hemet city councilmember and mayor. “They call city hall for potholes and everything else.”

Annexation means local control over growth, said Green, who opposed annexation before but supports it now because of development she said is on the horizon.

“What (annexation critics) don’t understand is what is going to come at them if there isn’t annexation because we don’t have control,” she said.

Hess, who opposes annexation, moved to an unincorporated area near Hemet in 2023 after looking at homes in Temecula and Murrieta.

City living is “not the same as unincorporated,” she said.

“We knew that we could have our RV on our property,” Hess said, referring to her family’s home outside the city limits. “It tends to feel like the residents are all there for the same reason ... It’s quiet. We don’t have noise pollution. We don’t have light pollution.”

She fears annexation would bring unwanted rules.

“It’s losing the ability to have our properties look the way we want to,” Hess said.

“I know my neighbor might paint their house pink or they might have nine cars or whatever. But I signed up for that. I don’t need a city ordinance to say that’s not allowed.”

Hess also doubts that a larger Hemet would lure shops and restaurants.

“Costco and Trader Joe’s are still not going to come to town even with our East Hemet and some other demographics pulled in,” she said.

Annexation-wary speakers filled the audience at Hemet City Council’s [March 25 meeting](#).

Some wanted no part of the city, saying Hemet can’t handle what it has now. Others questioned whether the 1,500 signatures on Hemet Rising’s petition to LAFCO were valid and lamented what they called a lack of transparency.

Annexation foes are circulating [an online petition](#). They've also set up a website, hemetregioninformed.org.

Riverside County has its own questions about a plan that would siphon tax income from its coffers.

[In a March letter](#) to Hemet City Manager Mark Prestwich, county Chief Operating Officer Juan Perez questioned the city's cost projections for serving a bigger Hemet and the extent of Hemet Rising's public outreach.

There's "a lot of false information" about annexation, Kotyuk said.

The city's projections are from the same consulting firm used by Riverside County, he said, adding that annexation wouldn't change zoning or where residents send their kids to school.

An earlier Hemet annexation northwest of the city saw "very little change for those folks," VanArdsdale said. "Their taxes did not go up when it came to property taxes. They didn't have to hook onto sewer when it came to septic tanks."

Annexation, if it happens, won't redraw Hemet's map overnight.

Technically, Hemet Rising hasn't submitted a formal application, LAFCO Executive Officer Gary Thompson said. Kotyuk said his group hopes to do so between July and September.

A public hearing would be scheduled and announced "once the proposal (has) basically been flushed out and we think it can be taken to a hearing," Thompson said.

It's not clear how long that might take.

LAFCO's panel consists of elected officials from cities, special districts like water agencies, Riverside County and members of the public. It decides whether annexations are approved in a process that involves open meetings and hearing from the public.

Kotyuk said Hemet Rising scheduled meetings July 29 and 31 at the [Historic Hemet Theatre](#), 216 E. Florida Ave., for the public to learn more about the potential annexation. Meetings will take place at 2 and 6:30 p.m. both days. Green said annexation backers and critics want the same thing.

“The negativity about Hemet, we’ve been our own worst enemy,” she said.
“What we need to do is pull together as a community. And instead of hating on each other, we need to be loving on each other to make this a better future.”

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