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Desert Hot Springs considers creating parks department



Desert Recreation District last summer operated the John Furbee Aquatic Center at the Desert Hot Springs Community Health and Wellness Center. A regional agency has suggested the recreation district expand into Desert Hot Springs, but at least some city leaders are hesitant. / Jay Calderon,/the Desert Sun

DESERT HOT SPRINGS — Despite a regional agency’s recommendation that the Desert Recreation District provide services for cash-strapped Desert Hot Springs, city leaders next month will start discussing the feasibility of creating their own community services or parks department.

The idea will be part of the budget debate that starts in April, when council members start to finalize the 2014-15 fiscal year plan.

Mayor Adam Sanchez told The Desert Sun that he hoped funds could be found in part by renegotiating the contract with the Boys & Girls Club of Coachella Valley, which was costing taxpayers \$250,000 a year.

Sanchez said a city-controlled department would be preferred over having the Desert Recreation District expand its boundaries into the city, a long-discussed idea that would likely lead to asking voters to approve an assessment.

“We would have to do it in a way that’s cost effective,” said Sanchez, a former director of the Boys & Girls Club of Desert Hot Springs who has a degree in recreation administration. “We have a parcel tax that we are going to campaign for (in June). And we need that to sustain the city.

“To go down the road and ask for another tax for recreation, I don’t know that’s the best way to approach it.”

Two other council members — Joe McKee and Scott Matas — agreed that a city-operated parks and recreation department would be preferred. But they both questioned whether it’s prudent at a time when they are in a fiscal emergency that’s forced them to cut staff by 66 percent.

“I don’t know, in the present circumstance, how we can afford it,” McKee said. “I’m willing to individually look at all the options.”

For at least seven years, Matas said city leaders have talked seriously about the idea of partnering with Desert Recreation District, which spans from Rancho Mirage to the Salton Sea.

The district last summer managed the John H. Furbee Aquatic Center in Desert Hot Springs under a \$70,000 contract. City officials told The Desert Sun the city could only afford a contract that opened the pool between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

“They run great programs throughout the Coachella Valley. I believe personally that they could run the pool longer throughout the year (and) help the nonprofits,” Matas said. “Our park space is so limited right now. We really need someone ... and we don’t have the money to hire a staff person to do it.”

In January, the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission — the state-mandated agency that draws jurisdictional boundaries for cities and districts — extended the recreation district's sphere of influence into Desert Hot Springs as well as Sky Valley and Desert Edge.

Expanding a sphere of influence is a precursor to annexation. But the district's general manager, Kevin Kalman, said officials are waiting for the city to hire a permanent city manager before moving forward with serious negotiations.

"We have discussed it. We're open to it," Kalman said of the district annexing Desert Hot Springs.

"The biggest thing that needs to happen is their leadership needs to get established. It's very difficult to have ongoing discussions when the management is not in place. ... When they have decided what their future direction might look like, we'll certainly entertain any discussion."

LAFCO planners, in a January report, noted that the partnership "will allow an opportunity for the district to provide readily available services" and "could be a precursor to more stable provision of recreational services in the Desert Hot Springs area."

If the district were to annex the city, Kalman said homes would see the standard \$9.90 a year assessment.

But because that amount doesn't cover the entire cost of services, voters would also be asked to approve an additional assessment to create revenue.

Matas said preliminary estimates showed it would cost city property owners \$45 to \$65 a year, a rate that could be higher or lower depending on what council and the district negotiate.

Desert Hot Springs voters already are being asked to raise taxes.

A June ballot measure would hike Desert Hot Springs' parcel tax on vacant land to \$372.68. That's more than 12 times the cost of the existing per-acre annual tax of \$29.80.

Matas, the only councilman to oppose putting the parcel tax on the ballot, said the decision about expanding recreation options should be left with residents.

"I think the voters need to decide what they want," he said of whether to expand the Desert Recreation District. "We know, as a city right now, we cannot afford to hire more staff, let alone run our own parks department. It's easier to contract out in most cases."