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Desert Hot Springs considers policing alternatives

Former Interim City Manager Bob Adams sent a letter to Riverside County Sheriff Stan Sniff last week asking for a bid.



(Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun)

DESERT HOT SPRINGS – City leaders are considering disbanding the local police force and contracting with the sheriff's department as they try to dig out of financial woes.

Former interim City Manager Bob Adams sent a letter to Riverside County Sheriff Stan Sniff last week asking for a bid.

"We are currently working on our next fiscal year's budget and we still desperately need to look at all our options," Adams wrote to Sniff. "I have been requested by the Desert Hot Springs City Council to solicit a proposal from your office to provide police services for our community."

"The sheriff's department has received a request from the city of Desert Hot Springs to provide a quote for law enforcement services to their city, " said Riverside County Assistant Sheriff Lee Wagner on Friday. "The sheriff's department is currently in the process of preparing the quote."

Acting City Manager Martín Magaña said he expects the sheriff's department proposal to come in during the next four to six weeks.

"We would like to keep the police department," said Councilman Joe McKee. However, "we have to know what our options are."

Councilman Scott Matas, who has adamantly been against contracting with the sheriff's department, also said the city needs to consider all possibilities.

"I don't know if we are at that point, yet," Matas said. "We need to give our police department the opportunity to see what they need to do."

"When you have large percentage of police living here, they are invested in their city and take pride in their community," he added.

Matas said he estimates the city will be in the same place in terms of funding with the sheriff's department. The city spends nearly 70 percent of its budget on public safety — nearly \$9 million — with the majority of that going to its police force.

There are two concerns the City Council must weigh carefully — public safety and officer safety — said Mayor Pro Tem Russell Betts.

When the police department gets down to a "certain level of police staffing, the City Council is going to have to act," he said.

Officers needed

The Desert Hot Springs police department has 23 officers, ranging from patrol to detective. To date, the former chief, two high-ranking commanders and at least three others have left the department. More are expected to leave for better pay in other cities.

A California Commission on Peace Officers Standard and Training report released in August found that the city needs at least 32 officers strictly dedicated to patrol to effectively police the city.

To fill the gap, Desert Hot Springs Police Chief Dan Bressler has been working to recruit volunteers and hire replacements.

"We have 11 officers in the hiring process," Bressler wrote in an email. "We are still understaffed, but I'm hoping to be in the 28 to 30 range in six months."

As for volunteers, Bressler said they have added two internal volunteers — one in records and one with vehicle fleet maintenance — and two citizens on patrol. The total now is 14 citizens on patrol, eight internal volunteers and one chaplain.

Bressler also is starting a concealed weapon permit process in the city. While this is not directly related to police officers leaving, he said that law-abiding residents carrying concealed weapons could possibly help deter crime.

The policy is in place and Department of Justice applications have been prepared, he wrote in an email. "Working on police department questionnaire, fees, internal procedures, record keeping and etc."

The police department still needs to develop an ID card to issue, but he expects the process to be complete within six weeks.

The chief declined to comment about the possible sheriff's contract.

Financial woes

The bid request comes nearly three months after city leaders opted to cut most police salaries by more than 22 percent.

The police union sued.

Cost-cutting began in December when city leaders, facing a more than \$6 million operational deficit and the threat of bankruptcy, declared a fiscal emergency, hoping it would give them more leeway when negotiating with the city's various employee unions, including its police officers' association.

"I think there was an agenda all along to go to the sheriff's department, and they are trying to blame the POA," said Wendell Phillips, an attorney representing the city's police union.

Phillips, who also is a former law enforcement officer, said he does not believe the city "can afford to pay for the level of protection they are getting now from the police department."

"They are going to get two deputies and one sergeant because they can't afford to staff up to the level they have now, according to their claims, which I don't believe," Phillips said.

During a recent mediation meeting, the city representative told him that "they hadn't finalized the budget reconciliation for last year," Phillips said.

"They don't even know how much money they really have," he added.

Early this month, city leaders voted to update a public safety measure that would increase the parcel tax on vacant land from about \$30 to \$372 per acre if approved by two-thirds of voters in June.

The statute, if passed, would update a measure passed by nearly 83 percent of voters in 2010 to fund their own police department.

Even if the public safety parcel tax passes, the city would be in a tight spot financially, McKee said.

A hearing date for preliminary injunction on the police union lawsuit is scheduled for April 1.

Phillips, who believes the city's declaration of fiscal emergency was illegal, said that if the judge approves the injunction, police salaries would go back to previous rates and the city would be liable for all back wages, which are estimated to be more than \$1 million.

"The meter is going to run until we get to court," Phillips said.

A frustrated public

In her husband's grocery market, Farmer in the Dale on Pierson Boulevard, Josefina Draayer said she hopes things change.

Draayer said she has called the police in the past to report vandalism and theft, but sometimes officers can take two hours to show up.

"The kids come after school, and they take things and run," she said, because they know they won't get caught.

"I don't call police anymore," she said.

In response to questions about police response time, Bressler wrote that "If we don't get to someone in what they think is a timely manner, it's because we are tied up helping on higher-priority calls."

"We don't ignore people who need our help," he wrote.

"If it's a low priority, or past crime, then our response times will not be as quick as it would be if there was a crime in progress or a serious crime that just occurred."

Angelo Avramidis, a resident who has owned the Sidewinder Grill in the city for 22 years, said he would rather have a local police force than the sheriff's department.

However, when the sheriff's department used to police the city in the '90s, they did not have their station in the city. Now there is one. That might help the sheriff's department do a better job this time, he said.