

The Desert Sun Editorial Board

10:45 p.m. PDT March 27, 2014

Our Voice: DHS wise to consider police alternatives

Desert Hot Springs needs to consider all the fiscal options, including whether contracting with the Riverside County Sheriff's Department is a better alternative than maintaining its own police department.

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It takes a certain degree of political courage to ask for a bid. Meeting with The Desert Sun editorial board in January, Mayor Pro Tem Russell Betts pointed out that three Hemet City Council members who asked for an estimate of service from Cal Fire/Riverside County Fire Department to possibly replace the city fire department are facing a recall.

At that meeting, Mayor Adam Sanchez was dead set against considering the sheriff's department, and other council members say they want to keep the police department. But in a city that spends 70 percent of its budget on public safety and is on the brink of bankruptcy — especially if the police union succeeds in its lawsuit challenging a 22 percent cut in police salaries — it's essential that the council consider all the options.

Representatives of the mid-valley cities of Indian Wells, La Quinta, Palm Desert and Rancho Mirage all tell us they are happy being served by the sheriff's department. But those are very different places than Desert Hot Springs, with crime rates that are average or below average.

An August report by the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) said that Desert Hot Springs' violent crime rates were more than 250 percent higher than the national average. And police Chief Dan Bressler is advocating for residents to pursue permits to carry concealed weapons for protection. He is working with the California Department of Justice to take over the permit process from the sheriff's department.

The police department has 23 officers. A former chief, two high-ranking commanders and at least three others have left. The POST report said the city needs at least 32 officers on patrol to effectively police the city.

Councilman Scott Matas, an adamant supporter of the police department, said that when a large percentage of officers live in the city they serve “they are invested in the city and take pride in their community.” But he also concedes the city needs to consider all possibilities.

Wendell Phillips, an attorney representing the Police Officers Association, contends there was an agenda all along to go with the sheriff’s department and “blame the POA.”

The lawsuit calls the city’s declaration of the fiscal emergency illegal. A hearing on a request for a preliminary injunction against the pay cuts is scheduled for Tuesday. If the judge approves the injunction, police salaries would go back to the previous levels. The city would be liable for back wages, which are estimated at more than \$1 million, Phillips said.

Indio, Palm Springs and Cathedral City also operate their own police departments. Coachella had its own department until 1998, when it switched to the sheriff’s department. Coachella City Manager David Garcia said the contract with the sheriff is the city’s biggest expense. The city once approached Indio about possibly providing police service in Coachella, he said, but decided to stick with the sheriff.

Across Riverside County, 17 cities contract with the sheriff’s department and 11 have their own departments.

There’s a degree of pride in a city operating its own police force. But there’s also value in capitalizing on the centralized services the sheriff can provide. The Desert Hot Springs City Council is wise to consider every option.

COMMENTS



[Bob Jazemski](#) · Top Commenter · [Indio, California](#)

This story makes it sound like the council is more worried about staying in office as opposed to possibly doing something to save the city from another bankruptcy. Is that the case?

[Reply](#) ·

· [1](#) · [March 28 at 8:22am](#)



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[Jens Mueller](#) · Top Commenter · [Cathedral City, California](#)

Bob, It does seem that some on the council are beholden to the union, while others are beholden to the taxpayer.

[Reply](#) ·

· March 28 at 12:54pm



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[John-Paul Valdez](#) · Top Commenter · [Columnist](#) at [Coachella Valley Weekly](#)

What does the city get with what funding? This is the question. Trying to smear the city with a statistic about rates of violent crime is not going to help it decide whether wholly owned city police officers or county officers are better or more expensive. That kind of linkage is inappropriate in the analysis. Measure F, a new parcel tax measure to increase the revenue of the city promises to use the money for police and fire payments, but makes no promise about whether or not this additional tax would save the currently owned police department. Again, management of the city is left on a free glide without any real decision making or analysis at all. That is the dilemma facing DHS, lack of structural financial management in the long term. Taxes are investments not payoffs for bad management. PS got a Mall for their tax increase. What can residents here expect for a historical tax increase by a "new" city council that ran on a "no new tax" pledge? Just asking.

[Reply](#) ·

· [March 28 at 6:39pm](#)



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[Jens Mueller](#) · Top Commenter · [Cathedral City, California](#)

It should be pointed out that the same police officers that patrol the streets now, would patrol the streets if RCS take over.

Same officers different uniform.

This is the 1st step to becoming solvent for DHS.

Also-

Same officers and your long term pension exposure is eliminated.

Same officers and your Liability exposure is greatly reduced.

Same officers and your insurance costs are reduced.

Same officers and you benefit from all the services that you can not otherwise can not afford like- SWAT, Gang Suppression Unit, Helicopter, and on and on....[See More](#)

[Reply](#) ·

· [March 28 at 6:20am](#)



• [Roland Alden](#) · [California College of the Arts](#)

It's great for cities to investigate their options and there is no reason for such an inquiry to be bogged down in politics. But before everyone rushes off to outsource they should really look into the numbers. Palm Desert pays Riverside Country close to twice as much for police protection as an average city our size. Last I checked Palm Desert wasn't exactly the crime capital of the U.S. so it is not clear why we should be spending more than others. Regardless of what the median and averages are you can still be paying too much. Palm Desert pays \$7000 per crime incident, 99.95% of which are non-violent "property" crimes. It is not clear that really meets a test for reasonableness.

[Reply](#) ·

· [March 28 at 8:44am](#)



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[Jens Mueller](#) · Top Commenter · [Cathedral City, California](#)

With all due respect, your source is incorrect. Palm Desert has a budget of \$17.4 million for 74 patrol officers = \$235k per
Cathedral City \$13.2 million for 30 patrol = \$440k per
These figures are for patrol officers only. Not investigative or administration.

[Reply](#) ·

· [1](#) · March 28 at 12:52pm



• [Lyle Kellogg](#) · Top Commenter

I'm neither for or against. I have seen the results for both. Are your police visible are they out in plain sight? Do the residents know them by name.? Do the residents wave to them and they wave back? When called are they there less then five minutes. Do they enforce traffic laws? If they do all the above they are worth keeping. The Sheriffs department will take time to get there because there is less of them. Will it reduce the cost for the city? Yes. They are not in the traffic business. Most gang crimes can be stopped by the residents themselves. Cell phones have cameras use them.

[Reply](#) ·

· [March 28 at 9:13am](#)



• [Amy George White](#) · Top Commenter · [Preston High School](#)

Pride goethe before a fall and this is DHS's 3rd time flip flopping on having their own PD or having the sheriff. When are they going to tackle the real question of whether or not they should even be a city?

[Reply](#) ·

· [March 30 at 5:30pm](#)