



[Greg Lee](#), KESQ News Channel 3 & CBS Local 2 Reporter, glee@kesq.com
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Desert Hot Springs considers sheriff's bid

DESERT HOT SPRINGS, Calif. -

The city of Desert Hot Springs is looking over a formal proposal from the Riverside County Sheriff's Department for police services. The city council made a request to RSO in response to its fiscal emergency as it looked for ways to cut costs. "The primary concern is to make our city safe," said mayor pro tem Russell Betts. "So the question is, what's the best way to get to that goal?"

The cash-strapped city continues to work towards a budget for the new fiscal year, a budget that could potentially face a \$3.8 million deficit. Switching from the local police department to RSO could present a cost-saving measure. "It saves just about \$700,000 a year and that puts about 10 more officers on patrol in the city," said Betts.

The police department's already made several cuts and currently operates with a much smaller staff than years past. There are 21 sworn officers in the department. The city set aside \$6.6 million out of its "bare bones" budget for the department in the new fiscal year. The options from the sheriff's department present a few different scenarios:

- \$5.9 million for the minimum deployment of 27 sworn officers

- \$6.3 million for 31 sworn officers

- \$6.9 million for 32 sworn officers

- \$7.1 million for 32 sworn officers and a 2-man special enforcement team

Some of the council are looking to the election on June 3 for direction. The increase on vacant parcel tax, would bring in \$2.6 to \$3.8 million to go towards public safety. "That would make it so much better for us," said Mayor Adam Sanchez. "I think with Measure F we can work with the police department so they can provide better services to the community."

Mayor Sanchez says much of the community wants to keep the department, while some feel differently. "I think if the sheriff's come in, they're more on it, they're more trained for the job and everything," said Steve Andrade, a Desert Hot Springs resident.

The council hopes to begin discussions after the June 3 election. In the meantime, it continues to deal with a lawsuit filed by the Desert Hot Springs Police Officers' Association over salary cuts.

Chief Dan Bressler released this statement in response to the proposal:

"Since the 90's, this department has been providing professional law enforcement service to the citizens of this city. Our crime rates continue to trend lower and our response times remain low. Our officers--some, including myself, who live, work and shop in Desert Hot Springs--have been essential to keeping this city safe through some very, very challenging times. Even though we've lost some good officers because of the recent pay reductions, we still have a strong core of great officers and staff dedicated to this city and the people who live and work here. This past November we were asked to cut about \$1.5 million from the budget that had already been approved for this fiscal year; and we were already several months into it. We are proud to have accomplished that goal. Our staff has bitten the bullet, cut every non-essential service and program, and continued to work hard at salaries far below what officers at other agencies in this valley or riverside county are making. For f/y 14-15 we've cut approximately 2.5\$ million off of our f/y 13-14 police budget. We cut two command staff positions at a savings of nearly \$500,000 and we are hiring new people at the officer level at a reduced rate of pay to replace those higher paid officers who have left. We have three officers newly hired and five more slated to start in June. We are utilizing reserve officers and volunteers at a rate not previously experienced in this city. We are rebuilding this agency in place, with only minimal and temporary service reductions--and those reductions have not impacted our response to calls for service.

I have the utmost respect for the riverside county sheriff's office and sheriff Sniff. I know their bid will be fair and equitable. I spent several years working at that agency so I am aware of their professionalism, and service levels. I also have confidence that the majority of our council, once they see that the difference in how much money we will require to operate compared to the cost of having RSO come in is negligible, will make the right decision to keep this agency, and our dedicated and hard working officers in place. This crisis will pass, we will survive as an agency and a city, and we will grow responsibly and appropriately. And most importantly, we will provide the service levels we have always provided at a far reduced cost. There is no doubt the cost of law enforcement services in past years has contributed to the fiscal woes we are in. But people can't forget that at the time, revenue projections were high, the state hadn't yet taken millions from us in RDA funds, and the past chiefs budgeted as directed by the then city manager. Now that we operate in a different paradigm, our agency will operate at a far lower cost. I would also hope that people would educate themselves regarding Measure F. The Mayor has stated that if that measure passes, we will stay in operation as an agency. I am anxious to get this all behind us so we can start down the path of working with the Mayor in his efforts relating to gang and youth crime intervention and reduction. I trust what the Mayor has stated and I trust the majority of our council to do the right thing for the people of this city. I think we deserve the trust they have

in us and on behalf of our staff and myself, I look forward to working with our new city manager and serving this city on into the future. In summary, no other agency can provide the level of service we provide, the personal law enforcement efforts, the community policing programs we've instituted, and the dedicated local officers we've grown. This city has instituted it's own municipal law enforcement agency for a reason--and this agency to this day represents the most efficient and effective use of the city's limited revenues.

I was just shown the options provided by the Sheriff, my feelings remain the same as stated above. It is also good to see that the budget figures we gave to council to provide similar levels of service are right on par with what i'm seeing in this bid. It validates our process and the cost projections we have provided to council."