

The Desert Sun

Reza Gostar

6:45 a.m. PDT May 23, 2014

Desert Hot Springs offered policing options

The Riverside County Sheriff's Department has offered Desert Hot Springs four contract options should it choose to disband its police force, according to documents obtained by The Desert Sun.

The options range from \$5.9 million to \$7.1 million a year, with the lowest bid giving the city more officers than its police department has now.

The city paid \$8.3 million in the 2013-14 fiscal year budget for its police department, but has been slashing costs since December as it faced a more than \$6 million operational deficit and the threat of bankruptcy.

Since those cuts, the most conservative estimates have the department costing the city between \$6 million and \$7 million.

For the 2014-2015 fiscal year, the city's own so-called "bare bones" budget estimates \$6.6 million for police services.

The contract proposal was received Tuesday, about eight weeks after former interim City Manager Bob Adams sent a letter to Riverside County Sheriff Stan Sniff asking for a bid.

"We presented several options that we thought were needed," said Riverside County Sheriff Chief Deputy John Anderson. "We allow the city to basically design extra officers to fit the need of the city, but there is a certain minimum level that is needed for safety."

No two cities among the 17 municipalities under a sheriff's contract are the same, he said.

"Some cities have a greater need for traffic patrol, and some others may need problem-oriented policing teams, or an accident investigating officer," he said. "Each is different."

In April, the Desert Hot Springs Police Department had 20 sworn police officers, and department leaders were planning to hire more officers to reach the 27 mark by the end of May, according to a report given to the public safety commission by Desert Hot Springs police commander Jim Neujahr.

Currently, the city's website lists 21 officers, not counting the recently hired Neujahr, at least two new contract officers — all part-time — and Chief Dan Bressler.

The 21 listed positions are five sergeants and 16 officers: nine on patrol, four in the detective bureau, one on the gang task force, one in school resource and a reserve.

Bressler has maintained that his department can run with the "bare bones" budget and provide the same level of service.

"Having just been shown the options provided by the Sheriff, my feelings remain the same," Bressler wrote The Desert Sun in an email.

"We are hiring new people at a reduced rate of pay to replace those higher paid officers who have left," he wrote. "We have three officers newly hired and five more slated to start in June. We are rebuilding this agency in place, with only minimal service reductions — and those reductions have not impacted our response to calls for service."

For the 2014-2015 fiscal year, that the department has cut approximately \$2.3 million from its budget, Bressler said.

"This year, through no fault of the past chief, we were asked to cut about \$1.5 millions from the budget that had already been approved for this fiscal year and we were already several months into it," Bressler said.

The breakdown of officers for the \$5.9 million sheriff's contract option is 16 patrol deputies, three investigators, seven sergeants and a lieutenant.

The \$7.1 million option includes everything in the lower option, plus a traffic deputy, three enforcement team members, a school resource officer and seven additional staff members.

Unlike a police department, the city also is protected against lawsuits and does not have to pay for medical leave or vacation. The sheriff's department absorbs those costs and rotates staff to fulfill the need of the contract.

"We don't contract for bodies," Anderson said. "We contract for hours."

Paying the bills

In 2010, Desert Hot Springs voters overwhelmingly passed a measure to fund their own police department.

On June 3, voters will decide on Measure F, also geared toward paying for law enforcement. It would increase the parcel tax on vacant land from about \$30 to \$372 per acre.

Resident Eddie Hernandez said he would like to keep the police, but he feels that sheriff's deputies would be stricter with enforcement.

"There is a lot of bad people here, but the police are not doing anything about it," he said, adding that maybe they've become too complacent with crime in the city.

But he also worries about how long sheriff's deputies would take to respond to incidents.

Deputies would be stationed in the city's current police station on Pierson Boulevard.

One block from the police station, Angelo Avramidis stands inside the Sidewinder Grill, a country-themed restaurant on Pierson Boulevard that he has owned for 22 years.

"All I can say is I hope this tax passes because things are getting a little better," Avramidis said. "Having sheriff deputies is not the same. It's nice to have officers here in town."

A rocky past

The bid proposal comes nearly six months after 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.

Police salaries were cut by more than 22 percent. To date, Chief Kate Singer, two high-ranking commanders and four to six officers have left the department. Others are also expected to leave for better pay in other cities..

"Community policing is big thing to me, and we won't lose that if we keep our current police department," said Councilwoman Jan Pye.

"I don't want to get off the negotiations with the POA," she said. "I want to continue to focus on negotiations with Desert Hot Springs Police Officers Association."

Bressler and everyone in the department are making sure that "everyone is doing the right thing during a time when officers are leaving," said Councilman Joe McKee.

"What we want to do is make sure that we are comparing apples to apples," McKee said. "The outcome of Measure F will have a major bearing on what we decide."

Mayor Pro Tem Russell Betts said that his major concern is providing the best public safety service possible to the community.

"What I'm looking at is getting officers on the street in sufficient quantity and to put to rest the crime problem in this city," Betts said. "However that can be done is the best solution."

Wendell Phillips, an attorney representing the police union who believes the city's declaration of fiscal emergency was illegal, said that if the union wins, 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 bottom line is I think the people are going to pass the tax under the premise that they are going to keep their police department," Phillips said.

The council has been trying to convince the public that if Measure F passes, the local police department will remain, he said.

"They have done everything to convince the public of that," Phillips said. "We heard that the proposal was presented in closed session and that they were trying to blame the fact that they did it in closed session on the litigation that we filed.

"We are all adults. Why not just tell people what's going on?"