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Desert Hot Springs police oppose contracting to county

DESERT HOT SPRINGS – Police Officers Association members showed up in force to oppose disbanding the Desert Hot Springs Police Department Wednesday, as the City Council nears its June 17 deadline for finalizing a "bare-bones" budget.

Mayor Pro Tem Russell Betts and Councilman Joe McKee were the only council members to put forth their lists of cuts and add-backs to the fiscal year 2014-15 budget.

Their proposals depend on the city giving up its police force to contract with the Riverside County Sheriff's Department.

"Ultimately, we want what's best for the city and to provide the utmost service we've shown since we've been here," said Nicholas Botich, vice president of the Police Officers Association.

"I think if our membership was asked and brought to the table, they would be willing to negotiate any terms that include keeping the department intact."

But as the department fights to save itself, it's also suing the city for 22.5 percent retroactive pay, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The sheriff's proposal comes in at \$6.2 million in estimated costs next fiscal year, while a city-run police force would cost \$6.9 million.

Wednesday's meeting continued discussions by the City Council, which began on Monday under the assumption the city could save \$900,000 to \$1.3 million next fiscal year by switching to the sheriff's department, Betts said.

But the city revised its savings estimate to \$734,498 just prior to meeting — necessitating further cuts to both Betts' and McKee's plans.

"If the local police department is kept, then we will have no choice but to look at further salary cuts for non-represented employees," Betts said.

The city will end fiscal year 2013-14 on June 30 with about \$200,000 and needs to end fiscal year 2014-15 with \$1.5 million on hand to make payroll and pay bills.

With the city almost able to cover next fiscal year's projected \$242,425 deficit, that leaves about \$1.5 million in required cuts to essential programs and services.

"I'm willing to look at someone's suggestion, but it has to add up," McKee said, in preparation for Wednesday's talks. "If someone wants to keep the police department they need to find the money, and that's going to get ugly with people being shed."

McKee and Betts spent Wednesday afternoon with the Hoteliers Association, which had \$31,805 withheld from the bare-bones budget — part of a list of "other programs and projects" totaling \$2.5 million.

McKee currently has the Hoteliers Association funded at \$25,000 with \$573,379 available for optional items.

Betts had it at \$31,605 with \$614,755 put towards optional items.

Should the remaining council members opt to preserve the city-run police department, more cuts will need to be made, with about \$3 million remaining to put towards the rest of government, McKee said.

"It's in our community's best interest to do everything possible to keep our police force intact," said Mayor Adam Sanchez.

"I'm not giving up on the department, but at the same time we need to find ways to reduce costs so we can keep them in the budget."

Councilman Scott Matas said contracting with the sheriff's department should be left up to the voters.

Former Mayor Yvonne Parks said during public comment that dismantling the police department would end community policing.

Betts said the city's community policing initiative was canceled a year ago to save money, but his budget proposal includes \$225,000 to revive it.

Transition to the sheriff's department would take about 2½ months, McKee said, and comes with two patrol support positions that act as a "force multiplier" — taking reports on crimes.

"People are not (filing) police reports," Betts said. "They're calling councilmen right now."

The sheriff's department's cheapest contract option comes with 34 employees as compared to the city-run department's 27, Betts said, and of those, 24 would be deputies on patrol compared with 17 officers on patrol.

"This back and forth about county deputies being bad, city police being good is, from my perspective, emotional," McKee said.