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## Needles' mayor says city should rethink Rick Daniels hire

However, council member confident in pact with outgoing Desert Hot Springs manager



*Outgoing Desert Hot Springs City Manager Rick Daniels. / Wade Byars, The Desert Sun*

**DESERT HOT SPRINGS** — The mayor of Needles wants his city to reconsider the job they've offered to outgoing Desert Hot Springs City Manager Rick Daniels and "take a second look at what's going on" in the Coachella Valley.

Needles Mayor Edward Paget made the comments Wednesday after getting calls from desert residents and reviewing an outside investigator's review of Daniels' workplace harassment claims.

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The 93-page report found "insufficient evidence" to support Daniels' accusations against councilmen Russell Betts and Adam Sanchez, who both denied any wrongdoing.

Details of Needles' contract with Daniels will be presented to its City Council on Tuesday. Paget said he expected the city would offer Daniels about \$130,000 a year to oversee city hall and the city-operated utilities in a town of about 5,000 people.

Daniels earns a base salary of \$217,000 in Desert Hot Springs, which he's led for six years.

"It does give me pause," Paget said Wednesday. "We ought to take a second look at what's going on and make sure we're doing a thorough background check. ... There's so much coming out of there. All we've been hearing since this vote (to offer the job) was taken was the bad things. Not many people have told us many good things."

Daniels said he had no regrets about filing the complaint, but admitted Wednesday that he's been searching for jobs in the public and private sectors since formally making the accusations in October.

Daniels declined to discuss the details of his contract negotiations with Needles. In July, Daniels was a finalist for a county administrator position in Oregon but the job went to a candidate from Washington.

"Needles is a wonderful community by the river. It's got great potential," Daniels said Wednesday. "Both Joyce and I have been impressed by wonderful and positive people.

"I think it would be a great opportunity. The whole thing is their prerogative. They need to feel comfortable. I'm sure that things will be fine."

Needles is structured differently than the five-member councils that govern the Coachella Valley's nine cities.

As mayor, Paget does not get a vote unless the other six council members are tied.

Needles Councilwoman Linda Kidd, who was on the subcommittee that conducted the city's executive search, expressed confidence that Daniels' contract would be approved.

**Kidd said the mayor hadn't informed the council about his concerns, stressing that the news from Desert Hot Springs is "not our concern."**

**"We're thrilled to have him up there," Kidd said Wednesday.**

**"I'm not interested in their pursuit or whatever their issues are. We've done our due diligence. We feel comfortable about that. ... I think this is necessary for our city to move forward."**

**The Needles council voted on July 23 to offer the job to Daniels, who was one of three finalists. The vote was 5-0; Paget didn't weigh in on the decision and one council member was absent.**

**The city has a roughly \$40 million operating budget, with the bulk of that dedicated to the utility companies the city runs.**

**Paget said the staffing change "isn't a wise decision," even if Daniels told Needles "he was going to do some things that were going to bring in more money to the city.**

**"I frankly think this is the wrong time to do it," Paget said.**

**The city's current city manager, David Brownlee Jr., is being demoted to his previous position as assistant city manager and utility manager.**

**Brownlee, who keeps his six-figure salary in the move, said he wasn't part of Daniels' recruitment process but appreciated the council supporting the "retreat" clause in his contract.**

**"Whether I'm comfortable or not ... Mr. Daniels is going to be coming here and I'm going to be a loyal and supportive employee," he said.**

**When asked if the city could afford to pay two executives' six-figure salaries, he quickly replied "no."**

**"They don't listen to me," Brownlee added. "They're looking for someone who is a white knight."**

**The Desert Hot Springs council accepted Daniels' resignation Tuesday at the same meeting in which they released the results of a nine-month investigation into Daniels' claims.**

**While the findings didn't support the hostile workforce accusations, they did find Betts "routinely" violated the Brown Act and recorded "one or more closed session meetings."**

**The findings by law firm Renee Sloan Holtzman Sakai have been sent to the Riverside County District Attorney's Office.**

**Betts has denied all the accusations — insisting he never leaked confidential information — and called Daniels’ complaints “unfounded, merit-less allegations.”**

**“I am not comfortable with what has become an endless attempt to divert attention from differences over policy and council votes using what I consider to be a politically motivated witch hunt,” Betts said in a statement this week.**

**“After two years of this distraction, it is time for the distraction to end,” Betts wrote. “It is time for this City Council to put this matter behind us and pledge to work together even if we disagree on votes before the council.”**

**Daniels said he did not regret filing the complaint.**

**By Wednesday, Desert Hot Springs had received résumés from two “highly qualified candidates,” according to a city news release.**

**It will accept applications through Tuesday and interview candidates on Aug. 19 for the interim position.**

**The interim leader would start within a few weeks of the hiring and stay in place through the November election, when Mayor Yvonne Parks, Mayor Pro Tem Scott Matas and Councilwoman Jan Pye are on the ballot.**

**“There are a few very good, experienced city manager candidates available that can meet the city’s needs over the next few months,” Parks said in a statement.**

**“The City Council looks forward to selecting one that can continue the progress that the city has worked so diligently towards over the last six years.”**

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