

Written by

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Our Voice: Rick Daniels leaves Desert Hot Springs in tenuous position



Rick Daniels has been a fixture in the Coachella Valley for three decades.

He worked for the Mine Reclamation Corp. in the campaign to turn Eagle Mountain into a regional landfill. He served for four years as CEO of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership and for two years as executive director of the Salton Sea Authority.

PDFs: [Desert Hot Springs confidential investigative report](#) | [Desert Hot Springs City Manager Rick Daniels' letter of complaint](#)

And for the past six years, he has been city manager of Desert Hot Springs. His public persona here comes to a rather bitter end as he accused two City Council members of creating a hostile work environment. An investigation found insufficient evidence to substantiate his claims against Russell Betts

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

and Adam Sanchez. The probe has cost the city \$77,000 so far. Before the results of the investigation were announced, Daniels submitted his resignation. He is the top contender to become city manager of Needles, a much smaller city of 5,000 and with a 40 percent pay cut — from the \$217,000 annual salary he made at Desert Hot Springs to \$130,000. After hearing about Daniels' difficulties in our desert, the mayor of Needles is having second thoughts.

A few years ago, Daniels was optimistic about a new era of cooperation in Desert Hot Springs, which has a long history of dissension on the council and turnover in the city manager's office.

In the past decade, the city has had seven full-time or interim city managers — including one who lasted just a day. Daniels’ tenure was a little longer than the average for city managers in California.

To the end, Mayor Yvonne Parks has been a strong supporter. She asked Daniels to reconsider his resignation. And she sent out a list of accomplishments achieved during his time with the city:

- Operation Falling Sun, a \$2.5 million military-style operation that netted 125 criminal suspects. At the time, it was the largest law-enforcement assault in Southern California history, involving 35 agencies.**
- Reduction of parolees in the city by 50 percent.**
- Completion of the Community Health & Wellness Center, including a Boys & Girls Club and a community pool.**
- The pending opening of the Borrego Community Health Foundation Clinic.**
- Annexation of 4,000 acres.**
- More than 48 miles of streets paved.**

While Daniels and the council deserve credit for those accomplishments, one major gaffe can’t be overlooked: Blowing \$265,000 on the Wellness & World Music Festival, which never happened. The city failed to solicit competitive bids for the contract or to investigate the promoter’s background, and had no way to recoup its investment.

And many Desert Hot Springs residents rightly perceive spending \$77,000 of taxpayer money on the accusation that two councilmen were bullies was another huge waste — in a city that has faced some the toughest budget challenges in the valley.

It still faces a tough challenge. During budget negotiations this summer, Daniels estimated the city had a little more than \$16 million in revenue and a little more than \$18 million in expenses. The city plans to dip into reserves to close the \$2.3 million gap. If the economy doesn’t get stronger, California’s Spa City could face grim prospects next year.

The situation sets up an interesting challenge for the council majority — Parks, Mayor Pro Tem Scott Matas and Councilwoman Jan Pye — who are up for re-election in November.

While the attorneys didn’t agree with Daniels that Betts and Sanchez created a hostile work environment, they are certainly sources of turmoil. But so is Daniels. It’s hard to envision how this council can regain the spirit of cooperation that it needs to meet the significant challenges that Desert Hot Springs faces. Despite six years of concerted effort by Daniels, we can’t say he’s leaving the city in great shape.

