

The Desert Sun

Written by

Reza Gostar

Dave Nyczepir

Nov. 12, 2013 | [7 Comments](#)

Desert Hot Springs explores dozens of options to balance budget

Official: All on table as Desert Hot Springs faces \$3 million plus budget gap

DESERT HOT SPRINGS — The Boys and Girls Club? No. Meals for seniors? No.

The police department? Absolutely not.

With more than 100 options on the table for balancing Desert Hot Springs' budget crisis during a special City Council meeting Tuesday, everyone had their sacred cow to save.

But in a city that has seen struggles with gangs and crime, many saw possible cuts to the police department — which has been making major dents in the problem since residents voted in a public safety tax in 2009 — as the most painful.

"I pray that you put your differences aside and work together," Paul Miller, pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Desert Hot Springs, told the council. If they cut police or officer salaries, "then just rename Desert Hot Springs 'Dodge City,'" he said.

The meeting brought out about 150 people.

"You heard what happened here tonight. Everyone said, 'Don't touch the police,' " said Councilman-elect Joe McKee, who serves on the city's finance committee. "I wish we didn't have to do that, but the numbers are the numbers.

“Even if we got rid of all our government — except for the police department and fire — we still wouldn’t meet this deficit. I think we have to be open to everything.”

Under the current budget, Desert Hot Springs would spend an estimated \$6.9 million more than it makes in revenue for fiscal year 2013-14, said Amy Aguer, city finance director.

That would leave the city more than \$3 million in debt with nothing left in reserves.

The city is expected to run out of general fund cash by March 31, 2014.

The tough cost-cutting decisions need to be made by December, said Interim City Manager Bob Adams, adding that “we have to get moving on this.”

“Your reserves are your rainy day funds, and it has been raining for three to four years now,” Adams told the council.

The City Council needs to make a decision on whether to declare a state of fiscal emergency and tell staff which cost-cutting measures to explore at its Nov. 19 or Dec. 3 meetings.

The city has a variety of options at its disposal before declaring bankruptcy, Adams said, but the procedure was included in the staff report as a reminder of what’s at stake.

“If you know bankruptcy is a possibility or disincorporation is a possibility and that adversely affects you, you have more incentive to solve the problem,” he said.

Cuts the council reached a consensus on were minor, such as eliminating City Council members’ auto allowances.

Mayor Yvonne Parks suggested a 10 percent across-the-board cut to vendor contracts that was well-received by other members of the council.

Total cuts are in the neighborhood of \$6.5 million, so a 10 percent cut would mean \$650,000 in savings — a good first step, Adams said.

Any potential cuts to police salaries will take time. The department is currently operating without a contract, which expired in June, and negotiating salaries and benefits requires a meet-and-confer process, the interim city manager said.

More than 65 percent of city’s current operating budget is allocated for public safety services.

“We’ve been very frugal in the past and we are doing absolutely everything we can toward cost savings,” said Desert Hot Springs Police Chief Kate Singer after the meeting. “I have faith that the council will look at the budget situation and allow the department heads who are working on it to share the implication their actions will take.”

RELATED: [Desert Hot Springs faces \\$3M shortfall](#)

DATABASE: [How much does it cost to run DHS City Hall?](#)

VIDEO: [Desert Hot Springs budget special session](#)

PHOTOS: [Desert Hot Springs budget special session](#)