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Police get lion's share of Desert Hot Springs spending



Public parks once littered with street gangs have been cleaned up and a robust anti-graffiti program has kept spray paint off the urban landscape. A public safety tax and massive law enforcement operations helped put dozens of gang members and violent offenders behind bars in 2009. / Richard Lui, The Desert Sun

DESERT HOT SPRINGS — While crime has been an ongoing issue in Desert Hot Springs, the city recently has seen fewer gang and violent crimes.

Public parks once littered with street gangs have been cleaned up and a robust anti-graffiti program has kept spray paint off the urban landscape. A public safety tax and massive law enforcement operations helped put dozens of gang members and violent offenders behind bars in 2009.

But the specter of bankruptcy is forcing the city to consider cuts to its police department, which accounts for half of the city's fiscal budget — a larger percentage than in any other Coachella Valley city.

"I moved here six years ago and there was a problem with graffiti and crime, but there have been drastic changes," said Public Safety Commission Chairman Lee Eastman, adding that making cuts to the police department is not the answer.

"If we cut too much, then we are going to wind up with same problems," said Jeff Bowman, owner of Living Waters Spa in Desert Hot Springs and Mission Springs Water District director.

"What we really need is a City Council that works hard to get economic development in town," Eastman said.

The city has 29 active officers — a little more than one officer for every 1,000 residents in the city of roughly 27,000 people. That staffing and the creation of more youth-oriented organizations and programs, however, have helped reduce the violent crime rate.

Still, many believe reducing police funding is unavoidable for a city facing a projected deficit of \$6.9 million.

Councilman-elect Joe McKee said "every city is struggling with the same problem, but we have to start doing some things now."

"Everybody got up and said 'Don't touch police,' but the numbers are the numbers," McKee said. "If you have 70 percent of the budget presiding in the same (public safety) department and you have a 40 percent deficit, then you are sort of in a position where you have to tackle that."

"With law enforcement compensation packages at more than \$200,000, there has to something touched there," Councilman Russell Betts said.

Adjusting police salaries — most near or above \$100,000 — is not synonymous with an increase in the crime rate and "us turning into Dodge City," he added, recalling statements made by several residents during the last budget meeting. The median income in the city is \$32,260, according to the 2011 American Community Survey.

Desert Hot Springs police Commander Dan Bressler said his officers are some of the most overworked in the state and their work is further exacerbated by overcrowded county jails that release “nonviolent” offenders early.

“People are getting kicked out of county jail because there is no room,” said Bressler, citing Gov. Jerry Brown’s prison realignment law as the reason. “Sometimes we arrest someone for burglary and see them out the next day.”

Councilman Scott Matas, who was reelected on Nov. 5, said he would oppose cuts to the police department or switching to a contract with the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department, which is among the City Council’s considerations.

“I think there are positions that were never filled,” said Matas, citing his support for one of the 102 possible cuts to the budget city staff suggested. This option would reduce funding for the police department from 34 to 29 officers, saving the city \$412,500 for this fiscal year and \$825,000 for the next.

Coachella, a city of more than 42,000 people, is among the valley cities that contracts with the sheriff’s department. About 39 percent of its overall budget goes toward law enforcement compared to Desert Hot Springs’ 50 percent.

One of the benefits is that “if we want more police, we just ask for more police. We don’t have to go through the bargaining process,” Coachella Councilman Steven Hernandez said.

Hernandez said the county option presents an advantage for the city from a liability standpoint because the sheriff’s department is responsible for the deputies and “the city is also not liable for the officer’s retirement.”

Plus, the sheriff’s office has a lot of resources, Hernandez said. “If there is an incident, the sheriff can call in another six officers and it works out that we don’t get charged for that.”

Coachella contracts include SWAT, radio dispatch, bomb squad and gang enforcement services, among many others.

“The downside to a sheriff’s contract is the lack of local control and the ability of the city council to implement a process,” Hernandez said.

Another factor to consider with a sheriff’s contract is continuity of law enforcement personnel in the neighborhood, he explained. “Deputies could be working in Coachella for three to four months and, all of a sudden, they could be shifted around or promoted.”

When law enforcement officers remain on the same beat, they are able to build a “rapport with the community and identify the harsher elements,” Hernandez said.

“In my seven years with the city, we’ve had about six captains because they have been promoted or retired,” he added.

Other budget-saving ideas involving the city's police department presented in the city staff's report included decommissioning the city's security camera systems and eliminating the police uniform allowance.

How they compare

Desert Hot Springs spends a larger percentage of its budget on its police department than other communities in the Coachella Valley.

For instance, in Cathedral City, the police department accounts for 44 percent (about \$13.2 million) of the city's budget for fiscal year 2013-14. Cathedral City, with a population of more than 50,000 people, was once budgeted for 57 officers, but that number is now down to 47 due to layoffs and vacancies.

In Palm Springs, public services, including police and fire, account for 47 percent of the city's budget. Police is about 25 percent of the budget.

Rancho Mirage budgeted \$6.07 million for its sheriff's contract in fiscal year 2013-14 — about 27 percent of its \$21.7 million in expenditures. The cost did not increase dramatically from last year's \$5.95 million, Director of Administrative Services Kim Valente told The Desert Sun previously.

Palm Desert spends about 31 percent of its budget on police services with the sheriff's department. La Quinta budgets about 35 percent of its budget to its police services.

In Indio, police services "account for the largest portion (43 percent) of general fund appropriations, totaling almost \$22 million," according to Indio's 2013-14 budget.

Indian Wells uses about 24 percent of its budget on police services with the county sheriff's department.

Despite the large percentage of the budget going toward police in Desert Hot Springs, Communications Director for the League of California Cities Eva Spiegel said a standard formula doesn't exist for allocating police budgets.

"Each city is different and their public safety needs might be different," Spiegel said. "There might be a city that needs to have more public works needs. It's important that you don't assign a one-size-fits-all because fiscal and community needs are different."

Carolina Vasquez, vice chairman of the Desert Hot Springs Public Safety Commission, said the community has changed. "It's slowly coming together and the school district is working very hard" and there are more programs, and youth services.

Vasquez, who grew up in Desert Hot Springs, said the community didn't always have social programs that are now available, such as the popular Boys & Girls Club and the Wellness Center.

Next week, besides the vote on declaring a fiscal emergency, the City Council will also consider a series of staff ideas, including reducing contract costs by 10 percent, an increase to a parcel tax and code enforcement costs.

Bowman said that one solution to the city's fiscal needs for public safety could be increasing parcel taxes. "If you asked a room full of residents if they would be willing to pay for police through a \$16 parcel tax, they would all raise their hands," Bowman said.

In 2010, the public safety commission discussed the possibility of increasing parcel tax rates for areas that have a high number of 911 calls, but the tax increase never passed, Bowman said. Vacant residential land rates are \$8 per acre and industrial vacant area rates are \$2 per acre. The council has considered making the formulas more equitable for some time but has never taken the step to increase the tax.

Betts, who said he plans to vote in favor of a fiscal emergency, said he would not support a tax increase that would affect homeowners but would discuss both industrial and residential vacant lands.

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