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## Desert Hot Springs Mayor-elect Adam Sanchez seeks to close budget gap



**DESERT HOT SPRINGS** — Mayor-elect Adam Sanchez said Sunday negotiating cheaper compensation and benefits for city employees — including police officers — will be critical as Desert Hot Springs closes a nearly \$5 million budget gap and tries to avoid municipal bankruptcy.

Sanchez, whose Nov. 5 election victory was finalized after last week's recount, hopes to ink the new contracts by the start of 2014, which would be halfway through the current fiscal year.

"If we have spent nearly half of our budget already, then there are going to be some cuts made," Sanchez told The Desert Sun on Sunday. "We are sitting back and waiting for those negotiations to take place."

The council last week unanimously declared a fiscal emergency, a step that gives cities greater flexibility to negotiate contracts and try to avoid declaring Chapter 9 bankruptcy.

*Mayor elect Adam Sanchez of Desert Hot Springs / Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun*

Despite projections showing the city will run out of cash by the spring, council members have insisted they want to preserve public safety spending, which makes up nearly 75 percent of its budget.

The city's police department alone makes up 50 percent.

Sanchez, who had the support of local Democratic clubs in his campaign to unseat Mayor Yvonne Parks, said Sunday that there is a fear that right away "you will have the unions saying, 'No, we don't think it's that serious.' "

"But it is that serious," Sanchez said. "We are trying to make it so transparent so that they can see the dire straits we are in. ... There is going to be some restructuring."

Desert Hot Springs City Hall is now working with Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit and the county's finance team to figure out what role the county may play in solving the budget crisis.

"We are opening up the books and we want to know where we are now with the budget of the city," Sanchez said.

Desert Hot Springs Finance Director Amy Aguer revealed last week that the city is on track to spend about \$4.8 million more than it has in revenue for the current fiscal year. That's down from a previously projected \$6.9 million.

Desert Hot Springs projects the current year revenue at \$13.9 million.

With the bulk of spending going toward police, Aguer has told The Desert Sun that even if the city cut all of its city hall positions there would still be a budget shortfall because of public safety spending.

Cutting public safety can be a politically tricky decision, as many local leaders across the Coachella Valley campaign on the idea that police and fire budgets must be preserved.

"My colleagues always said that 'police are the priority' but I have always disagreed," Sanchez said. "When I first went on the council, I could see that the budget was not balanced."

During the Nov. 19 council meeting where the fiscal emergency was declared, a handful of local residents publicly asked council not to cut any police funding.

Councilman-elect Joe McKee noted that it's always been the "assumption that we are not going to do anything with the police and are not going to cut salaries but that sort of boxes you in the corner."

He did not say whether he would support a police salary cut, but didn't rule out cuts to public safety budgets.

"We've tried to arrest are way out of crime but it's very expensive," McKee added.

Sanchez said he does not believe the city is at a point now where it would slip back into higher crime rates if cuts to the police department are made. The city has popular after-school programs it didn't have in the early 1990s and most of the gangs have disappeared because of a public safety tax and massive law enforcement operations that started in 2009.

A former director of the Boys & Girls Club, Sanchez said he would create a quality-of-life task force that has community involvement. The goal would be to study the link between family support programs with job training centers.

"We have community engaged policing, and it looks good on paper but it's not working on the ground level," Sanchez said.