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Desert Hot Springs police costs up, as is crime in city

Study also says officers too few, are overworked



A Desert Hot Springs police car is seen in a July 2013 file photo. / Richard Lui, The Desert Sun

DESERT HOT SPRINGS — During the past five years, Desert Hot Springs has steadily increased funding to its police department so much so that it now encompasses more than 60 percent of the city’s budget. Despite this, an August study by the California Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training has found that violent crime rates here are more than 250 percent higher than the national average.

Both Mayor Adam Sanchez and Mayor Pro Tem Russell Betts said they had not seen the report until two days after The Desert Sun requested a copy of it on Dec. 4.

“This is information the City Council should have had and now we are reviewing it,” Betts said Tuesday.

They learned of this report in the midst of the city’s ongoing efforts to fiscally break even.



According to city documents, Desert Hot Springs is on course to collect revenues of \$13.9 million this fiscal year, and spend \$18 million — more than \$9 million on police and code enforcement services.

A public comment session, attended by just one citizen, preceded a closed session by the government of the city of Desert Hot Springs on Tuesday. / Omar Ornelas, The Desert Sun

Last month, the city declared a fiscal emergency; a legal maneuver city leaders are hoping will give them more legroom in their efforts to make the necessary cuts, which are being hashed out during ongoing negotiations with city unions, such as the teamsters and the Desert Hot Springs Police Officers’ Association.

Needing to make \$2.6 million in cuts by June, the City Council held a close-door session Tuesday to discuss labor negotiations with the city’s unions. Interim City Manager Bob Adams declined to discuss what took place at the meeting, saying, “Right now, there haven’t been any decisions made so there is nothing to share with the public.”

Betts would not say how or if the findings of the state commission’s report would affect city negotiations with the police union.

The study, which Desert Hot Springs police Chief Kate Singer gave to Adams, found that the city’s violent crime index was 266.09 percent higher than the national average and the property crime index “exceeded the national average by 85.35 percent.”

Desert Hot Springs also “surpassed the state crime index by 235.41 percent in terms of violent crime and 106.87 percent for property crimes.”

Looking at annual crime data from 2007 to 2012, the study found that violent crime has been trending upward, while property crime is trending down.

The study also determined that Desert Hot Springs police officers are overworked and the department is understaffed. During the 13-week period in which the study was conducted, the report stated, there were a total of 16 officers on duty.

“The overall ratio for the Desert Hot Springs Police Department suggests that calls-for-service consumed time (and) workload is very heavy for the number of officers assigned.”

Paul Tapia, a former Desert Hot Springs police officer and former president of the department’s police union, said when he worked for the department he responded to anywhere from 20 to 30 calls a day.

Tapia said other police departments in similar-sized municipalities “would get maybe one or two calls a day.”

Currently, the city has 28 active police officers, 16 of which are on patrol duty, serving a city of roughly 27,000 people.

According to city records, as of Oct. 8, the highest paid rank-and-file Desert Hot Springs police officer was on course to earn \$211,000. The lowest paid rank-and-file Desert Hot Springs police officer was on course to make \$86,092. These amounts included regular pay, benefits and overtime.

Police department leadership, which includes two commanders and a chief, averaged more than \$250,000 in annual salary.

Wendell Phillips, an attorney representing the Desert Hot Springs Police Officers’ Association, said the police union is “willing to listen to any idea that the city comes up with ... We want to make this work.”

Phillips said these officers are not making \$100,000 unless “they are working double shifts and after awhile the overtime is not worth it.”

Betts said the council will be looking at everything but “the time for each department to make their own recommendation for cuts is over.

“We don’t have much time left,” he said.

Sanchez has said previously that he hopes the police department will bring something to the table.

So far, no potential cuts to the police department have been announced, except a freeze on five budgeted officer positions, which were never filled.