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Desert Hot Springs police offer city financial plan



Officer Daniel Bressler, who now serves as the Desert Hot Springs Police department's acting chief, walks to his squad car on Wednesday, July 24, 2013. / Richard Lui/The Desert Sun

DESERT HOT SPRINGS — While city officials have been working to find ways of cutting costs, Desert Hot Springs police officers are offering their own proposal to save the city from bankruptcy.

In a report titled "[Financial Brainstorming Counter Proposal](#)," the Desert Hot Springs Police Association has laid out a plan to keep police working while still saving the city more than a \$1.1 million in expenditures, according to Wendell Phillips, an attorney representing the police union.

City councilmembers will discuss the city's financial situation at their next meeting Tuesday evening but potential cuts to employees will be discussed in closed session.

Shared exclusively with The Desert Sun, the report outlines a nine-point plan that includes cuts to the police department, including "eliminating two command staff positions;" instituting a hiring freeze and halting overtime and comp pay for 17 months. It also proposes adding two new taxes to the ballot and either closing or privately funding the city's year-old Health and Wellness Center.

The Desert Sun learned on Saturday that Police Chief Kate Singer and Commander Ken Peary have decided to retire "as soon as possible," according Interim City Manager Bob Adams. The announcement came less than a month after city leaders declared a fiscal emergency in an effort to avoid bankruptcy. Phillips said that both Peary and Singer retired as of last Friday. Singer and Peary have yet to be reached for comment.

In the same email, Adams said that Commander Daniel Bressler would be stepping in as the acting chief of police. On Monday, Bressler said he found out about the staffing changes the same day they were announced.

In November, the City Council unanimously approved a fiscal emergency in an effort to cut costs by more than \$2 million by June in order to pay city employees and other contractual obligations. City leaders hoped the move would give them more leeway while negotiating with the city's various unions, including the Teamsters and Police Officers Association.

According to city documents, the city is on course to collect revenues of \$13.9 million this fiscal year, and spend \$18 million. More than \$9 million of that is allotted to police and code enforcement services.

Phillips said that the city's plan has been to balance its budget on "the backs of its employees but that won't work with trained public safety professionals."

"They have to work to be competitive with the rest of the valley and this isn't competitive with anyone," Phillips said, referring to a proposal by city staff that has yet to be released to the public.

According to Phillips, city staff has proposed a plan in closed-session negotiations that called for an annual decrease of police union salaries and benefits by \$1,167,000.

The reduction would be implemented by a 22.5 percent reduction in salaries, an incentive/education pay cap at five percent, a \$520 monthly payment of health benefits per employee and a reduction to 100 paid holiday hours each year.

“If they do this, not only will the existing officers leave but anybody that would come take this job at the rate that the city has posted will mean that they can’t get a job any place else,” Phillips said, adding that the city would not get the same quality of officers.

According to city documents, a rank-and-file Desert Hot Springs police position, without an incentive bonus, costs the city about \$78,511. This amount includes pay, benefits and other contributions. Without incentives and stipends, the base salary for a regular police officer position is \$34,403.

As of Oct. 8, the highest paid rank-and-file Desert Hot Springs police officer costs the city more than \$200,000 annually, while the lowest-paid officer was on course to make in more than \$80,000. Once again, these amounts included pay, benefits and other contributions.

“We have a plan, the city needs to come up with plan,” Phillips said. “But this is not set in stone, we are willing to talk, but our officers and members can’t cut their paychecks down to where they can’t pay their bills anymore.”

Phillips also that the union members believe that they have a contract with the city. “We were offered a new contract by the city, our members ratified it and for some reason when it came down to formally recognizing the agreement it didn’t happen.”

City officials have said publicly that the city’s contract with the police union has expired and that a new contract was never ratified with a vote from the city council.

“We are willing to make concessions to the contract but if they don’t recognize the contract we don’t have a lot of choices. We are going to litigate,” Phillips said, adding that a POA lawsuit will force the city into bankruptcy.

Phillips said that the police union wants the voters to decide whether they would be willing to pay extra taxes for police services. “We believe most of them do,” he explained.

Citing an August study by the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, which found that violent crime rates in the city are more than 250 percent higher than the national average, Phillip said there is “war going on and when there is a war it’s not a time to cut soldiers.”

On Monday, Councilman Russell Betts said that he not seen that police union's counter proposal. "This would be something the council will consider in closed session."

The commission study also found that funding to the city's police department has steadily increased to where it now encompasses more than 60 percent of the city's budget.