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## Desert Hot Springs council to discuss police salary cuts



*The City Council will consider Thursday its largest proposed cost-cutting measure to date including slashing police salaries by more than 20 percent in an effort to avoid bankruptcy. / Desert Sun file photo*

**DESERT HOT SPRINGS** — The City Council will consider Thursday its largest proposed cost-cutting measure to date including slashing police salaries by more than 20 percent in an effort to avoid bankruptcy.

After weeks of negotiations and closed-room meetings with union representatives, interim City Manager Bob Adams has proposed a 22.5 percent cut in almost all city salaries, a cumulative cap on all incentive pay, a reduction in paid holidays and many other changes, he told The Desert Sun on Wednesday.

Adams said the salaries for two of the city's highest-paid positions, the police chief and city manager, will be reduced by more than 22.5 percent.

"Right now, we have limited resources and a cash flow challenge," said Mayor Adam Sanchez. If this proposal is what "city staff is recommending that needs to be done in order for us to make our obligations then we need to move forward."

The reductions, which will be presented to the City Council for a vote on Thursday, represent a \$2 million annual cost-savings. This means the city will still have to deal with the \$4 million budget gap in the next fiscal year.

Wendell Phillips, a representative for the Desert Hot Springs Police Officers Association, said that if the city were to make these proposed cuts "a lot of police officers would leave the job."

Phillips called the city's proposed cuts "draconian" and "unworkable." In a written counter proposal shared with The Desert Sun, Phillips said that the cuts "would cause a mass exodus of trained and dedicated public safety personnel."

He told The Desert Sun that the city would end up getting inexperienced officers "straight out of the academy that would cause the city more of liability" in terms of lawsuits.

If the council approves these cuts, "you will get the worst of the worst," Phillips said.

Sanchez said that these cuts in salaries are being done to save the city's police department. "We are doing this in the best interest of the welfare and safety of the residents of the city."

The city has "cops now, will some of them decide to look for other positions? That is a choice they have to make," Sanchez said. "I don't see officers leaving right away; it will take time to find another place."

The process of finding other police jobs can take three to six months, and the city's acting chief of police Daniel Bressler "is going through an aggressive plan to utilize reserves in order to fill those spots if anyone does leave," Adams explained.

Bressler told The Desert Sun previously that he was confident the quality of police officers and the department's response time would not be reduced because of these changes.

"If you call us, we will be there," Bressler said.

So far, four senior police employees have left their positions, including former chief Kate Singer, Det. Eddie Cole, Cmdr. Ken Peary and police employee Shannon Buckley. Singer, who announced her retirement to city staff last week, said Tuesday that "although these decisions were heart-wrenching" they needed to be done in light of the city's fiscal crisis.

If the changes are approved, Adams said that the police chief's base salary will be reduced by 24.8 percent, from \$175,620 this fiscal year to \$132,000 and the city manager salary will be reduced by 32 percent from \$234,360 to \$165,000. The last city manager's base pay included an 8 percent city contribution toward his retirement, he noted.

Furthermore, a new nine-step salary raise system limited to a 3 percent increase a year will be implemented for all city employees, including police and city officials.

This will be a merit-based system and not based on time on the job, Adams explained.

While some positions will get a more than 22 percent cut in salaries, others will see smaller cuts because they will be assuming other duties from jobs that will be eliminated completely, Adams said.

"What this does is get us to zero and will cut half the hole for this year," Adams said. "Obviously, we cannot afford to keep going the way we are."

Desert Hot Springs is on course to collect revenues of \$13.9 million this fiscal year but spend \$18 million, leaving a budget gap of more than \$4 million to fill.

According to city documents, "in order to get the city to a zero fund balance by June 30, 2014, the city needs to continue the cuts which have already been made, including freezing five vacant police officer positions," and still find additional reductions totaling nearly \$2.5 million.

This will help the city have the "fund balance it needs to meet cash flow needs for the July 1, 2014/January 1, 2015 period in the next fiscal year," Adams wrote in the staff report.

"There will still need to be more changes made," Adams said. If city staff's proposal is approved, the salary changes will be implemented on Dec. 28.