

Written by

Reza Gostar

The Desert Sun

Dec. 19, 2013 | [7 Comments](#)

Desert Hot Springs council approves salary cuts by unanimous vote



Desert Hot Springs policer officer Kyle Gonzales reads the agenda during a City Council meeting on Wednesday evening, December 19, 2013. The Desert Hot Springs City Council voted on cutting salaries of police and city employees during the meeting. Photo by Gerry Maceda, Special to The Desert Sun

DESERT HOT SPRINGS — The City Council approved cutting police and city employee salaries by unanimous vote Thursday amid concerns of bankruptcy and protests from the local police union.

“We are going to file a complaint with the Public Employee Relations Board tomorrow,” Wendell Phillips, an attorney representing the Desert Hot Springs Police Association, told The Desert Sun after the council’s decision.

“They did not abide by the impasse procedures as required by AB 646 (a California State Assembly bill).”



The council offered the police union a deal and “although they never formally recognized it, they implemented part of it,” said Phillips, who claims that the council’s decision violates California employee law.

Phillips said under the law the city is required to implement a fact-finding process before reaching an impasse and cutting employee salaries or positions.

Desert Hot Springs police officers attend City Council meeting on Wednesday. / Gerry Maceda/Special to The Desert Sun

The law prohibits “a public agency from implementing its last, best and final offer until at least 10 days after the fact finders’ written findings of fact and recommended terms of settlement have been submitted to the parties and the agency has held a public hearing regarding the impasse.”

Phillips said that a declaration of a fiscal emergency does not negate the responsibility of the city to go through this process.

With the motion passing, a 22.5 percent cut in almost all city salaries, a cumulative cap on all incentive pay, a reduction in paid holidays and other changes will be implemented Dec. 28. These reductions represent a \$2 million annual cost-savings.

This means the city will still have to deal with \$4 million budget gap in the next fiscal year.

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.

In November, the city declared a fiscal emergency in a move city leaders hoped would give them more leeway when negotiating with the city’s various unions, including the police and Teamsters.

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.

City leaders are hoping that the cuts will help the city find the fund balance they need to meet the municipality’s cash flow demands for the next fiscal year.

Mayor Pro Tem Russell Betts said “there is nobody up here taking the situation lightly.”

Betts said the city has a competent legal counsel, and that the situation “for this community is very serious ... if we had done this a few years ago it would be less painful.”

Acting police chief Dan Bressler said that the city is “going to lose some high-quality officers when this takes effect.”

“We didn’t put a gun to anyone’s head for our salaries,” he said. “We came here because of competitive wages, and for this to fall on our families because of the mistakes of past city staff and city manager — that is wrong.”

Regardless, Bressler said that he understands both sides of the situation but that the city and police department have “to go forward and be stronger.”

Councilman Scott Matas, who has been staunch supporter of the city’s police department, said public safety has been the most “important thing to me but we have to look at the overall wellness of the community” and closing down the local Boys & Girls Club or shutting down the water at city parks are not options.

Phillips said the police union will go through all the legal processes in contesting the council’s decision.

“This wasn’t legal,” he added. “There were changes they made to the salaries that we don’t know about until tonight ... We only met with the city manager twice.”