

Desert Sun

Estimated printed pages: 4

March 27, 2005

Section: Opinion

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City council gave too sweet of a deal to city manager**

Desert Hot Springs leaders financially overcommitted to Hanson contract

The Desert Hot Springs City Council made a big blunder when it promised to give its new city manager \$220,000 in severance pay if he quit.

Such generosity is unheard of, especially for a city that was literally bankrupt at the time. Obviously, top executives get severance pay if they are forced out of their jobs. But who ever gets severance pay when he simply quits? Certainly no other city manager in the valley has such a provision in his contract. The head of the California City Manager's Foundation, comprised of about 220 city managers, called it "malarkey."

We couldn't agree more.

We found ourselves shaking our head last week with the news that City Manager Jerry Hanson had cashed in his severance pay last year.

We don't fault Hanson for negotiating a great deal for himself.

We just question the judgment of the Desert Hot Springs City Council.

After all, this was a city that did not have enough money to clean streets, remove graffiti, or provide water for the faucets in city parks.

For several days last week, city council members would not answer questions. They focused instead on who leaked the information of Hanson's payment. That's a good question and a relevant concern. But it also misses another, even more important point: why did they give the city manager such a generous contract.

City officials finally gave some answers, but their responses are not very convincing.

They said they needed Hanson badly to guide them out of bankruptcy when they promoted him to city manager from director of public works and city engineer. The city wanted a familiar face for the job - and was willing to pay an exorbitant amount to get the man they wanted.

They said no other city was like them because of the bankruptcy so the city manager's contract should not be compared to other cities.

Precisely. The bankruptcy is one more reason not to give him such a generous contract.

Hanson said he had some doubts about whether the mess he was asked to clean up - and possible in fighting among council members - would be worth the headaches. He said he also worried that he might have difficulty landing another job because he was over 55 years old. That is why he asked for the severance pay if he ever wanted to walk away.