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## Manager exits; city responds

Desert Hot Springs residents look upon Hanson's salary with either support or dismay

**Nelsy Rodriguez**

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DESERT HOT SPRINGS - In a quiet city hall Friday, Desert Hot Springs spokeswoman Teresa Thompson sat near a newly vacated office. City Manager Jerry Hanson had completed his full-time employment with the city. His retirement will become effective Monday.

On the desk near Thompson lay binders at least 5 inches thick holding applications from those wanting Hanson's job.

But how many would hold the qualifications Hanson had? Thompson asked. A degree in law, a license in engineering and architecture and the fortitude to pull a city out of bankruptcy.

"We were blessed," Thompson said of her former boss.

While city officials and employees have stood behind Hanson amid controversy, tax-paying residents - who recently learned they paid him more than \$322,000 last year and that he got 1,700 hours of vacation time in 20 months on the city's payroll - are less understanding. They want to know why their elected officials OK'd that deal.

"I don't appreciate my council members either not being familiar with the contracts of the city manager or not being familiar enough to understand them," said Desert Hot Springs resident Linda Crowson. "That's unacceptable to me."

Crowson, a 16-year resident of the city perched on the edge of a building boom, echoed the voices heard throughout the city Thursday after The Desert Sun published an article detailing Hanson's vacation and sick time compensation deal: 1,700 hours in 20 months.

### Support for the city

Yet others have stuck by city officials, some of whom in recent months have remained quiet about Hanson's deal

### WHAT'S NEXT

#### UNKNOWN FINAL PAY

**CHECK:** Jerry Hanson will retire effective Monday. He could receive a final paycheck of at least \$39,000 for vacation time he didn't use of 1,700 hours he earned in the last 20 months with the city.

**BACK IN SESSION:** Desert Hot Springs City Council will resume its meetings in August. It meets the first and third Tuesdays.

**NEW MANAGER:** City Attorney Corky Larson will act as city manager in the interim. The city has received more than 40 applications for the position. The council has called a closed-session meeting for Monday to discuss recruiting a new city manager.

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Rabbi Alon Barak of Temple Baruch Hashem in Desert Hot Springs said city officials are right not to comment.

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"It seems The Desert Sun always wants to talk about the bad breath," Barak said. "All of us have morning breath, I'm not going to have (the paper) delivered to my house when it's always talking about my breath."

Barak said news coverage of Hanson's 2004 earnings and subsequent stories reporting his benefit packages were overkill.

However, a large contingency of residents want to know more.

Since last Friday, Mayor Matt Weyuker, Mayor Pro Tem Mary Stephens and Councilman Will Pieper have not returned repeated calls requesting comment on Hanson's vacation time.

But Mayor Matt Weyuker slammed the continuing coverage of city hall finances in the most current edition of The Valley Breeze, the city's local paper. In his standing column, Weyuker wrote that The Desert Sun, local TV news and outraged residents harassed Hanson out of his job.

"I've decided to take the gloves off and inform you of the how and the why of the insidious scheme to both embarrass three of us on the Council who supported Jerry, and hound and harass the City Manager until he 'hollered uncle' and resigned," Weyuker wrote. "Who are those that sit in the shadows and orchestrate these back-stabbing attacks on certain members of the City Council and former City Manager?"

The Desert Sun's report on Hanson's salary and his vacation time was prepared from documents obtained from the City of Desert Hot Springs through California's open records act.

But questions remain. Residents said Thursday they wanted to know if there was more they didn't know about and why Desert Hot Springs officials won't address these issues.

City Council's actions will not go unnoticed when voters approach the ballot box in November, many residents said.

For better or worse, Desert Hot Springs residents were handed a \$322,809 bill to pay Hanson for his services in 2004. Some think that's too high.

But despite a leak of Hanson's W2 form to television media in March following the city manager's firing of a popular police chief and a subsequent city press release confirming the amount, a comprehensive breakdown of how Hanson was able to net his 2004 earnings wasn't made available until early in July.

The Desert Sun issued its first public records requests for the information in late March.

Desert Hot Springs resident Ranell Wood gasped as she learned Desert Hot Springs City Council approved several contracts that allotted Hanson some 1,700 hours of vacation time in the last 20 months.

"Something like that should never happen," Wood said of the contract benefits. "It's just unfortunate it went on as long as it did because it's more bad publicity."

Barak disagreed, saying the compensation was justified because Hanson brought millions of dollars to the city.

"He's linked to all of the money that has come into this town," Barak said. "I say maybe a raise is a good idea. Maybe some extra vacation hours is all right."

Barak said he trusted the City Council to manage the city properly, but Crowson said civic activity should be done with the sun shining on the government.

"It makes us look like a poor city that does not manage its finances well," she said.

City Manager Jerry Hanson could not be reached for comment.

### **Closed-session concern**

Residents have also been concerned about closed-session meetings. Wood agreed with Crowson that more should be done in view of the public eye.

"The more they do behind closed doors, the more suspicious the public's going to be," Wood said. "I know I am."

Wood praised Councilman Gary Bosworth for continually commenting to the press about the issue and said the other council members should also speak up. Bosworth was the only dissenting voice when Hanson's original contract was passed. The contract included a clause that granted Hanson a severance package whether he left the city voluntarily or was fired.

Resident Wayne Harris also agreed that the City Council should answer to the public.

"They're elected by the public," Harris said. "If the public has questions, they or their assistant or their staff should at least reply."

However, another Desert Hot Springs resident said she agreed with some city officials' tactics of refusing to comment.

"I think it's wise," said resident Lily Ann Henkel. "You already have (social and financial) problems and if you're going to be airing your dirty sheets, people aren't going to come."

Henkel said it didn't bother her that public dollars were paying for the contract benefits.

"If he made it, he made it," Henkel said. "Better move on and talk about the positive."

But Crowson said that public money is a point of public interest and discussion.

"A lot of that should have been brought to light, and it's kind of scary thinking if the W2 form hadn't been let out none of this would have come out," she said. "That is out of the public, that's not private."

### **Bankruptcy, ballot talk**

The bottom line offended many residents who complained that the benefits were too generous for a cash-strapped city, which is just emerging from a three-year, nearly \$11 million bankruptcy and where the median income is about \$29,500 a year.

"I feel the total compensation package is too high for our city," said resident Paul Luszc. "I just want know where to sign up for these (benefits) and I think the city needs to wake up, go to the ballot box and make a change."

Crowson also reiterated that November's election will be important. Currently Vice Mayor, Stephens plans to run for the mayor's seat and Councilmen Will Pieper and Bosworth are up for reelection. Mayor Weyuker has already announced that he will retire.

Realtor Alex Bias also plans to run for mayor.

Potential City Council candidates include Boys and Girls Club director Adam Sanchez, Planning Commission Vice Chairwoman Yvonne Parks, online law student Robert Bentley, CPA and accounting manager for Coachella John Gerardi, Fleet manager for Palm Springs Steve Drinovsky and Fire Safety Specialist with Riverside County Fire Department Dale Evenson.

"It's definitely going to make a difference at how we look at the council race, the mayor's race," Crowson said. "And whether or not we have to start all over."

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