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Colton could save \$8.2 million by outsourcing police and fire, audit says

Michael J. Sorba, Staff Writer

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COLTON - The city could save as much as \$8.2 million by eliminating its police and fire departments and contracting with outside agencies, according to audits of the departments which were released Friday.

The firm estimates between \$2.3 million and \$8.2 million would be saved if the City Council elected to contract for public safety services or form a joint agreement with other cities in the area.

Both audits will be presented to the City Council during a meeting Tuesday, along with an audit of the Colton Electric Utility.

"I'm probably going to spend the next couple of days reading (the audits)," Councilman David Toro said Friday. "What is going to interest me the most is what savings we're going to get out of them."

Other councilmembers reached by telephone Friday were Richard DeLaRosa and Alex Perez. Both said they either hadn't read the audits or briefly looked over them and would take a full look over the weekend.

Mayor Kelly Chastain and council members Deirdre Bennett, Susan Oliva and Vincent Yzaguirre did not immediately return calls for comment Friday.

The police department is budgeted to spend \$12.6 million this fiscal year, with an additional \$480,000 for code enforcement and animal control services. It consists of 63 sworn positions and 23 civilian staff, the police audit says.

To save money, the audit suggests contracting with the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department. It presented two options.

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An estimated \$5.2 million contract with 41 employees, including 33 sworn positions. Other expenses the city would have to pay would raise the annual bill for police services to \$6.4 million, or \$5.6 million less than the city will spend for the service this year.

The second option would be a 65-member department with 57 sworn personnel that would cost an estimated \$10.6 million, for a \$1.5 million savings, the audit says.

Neither option included the costs for code enforcement and animal control.

Wanting to maintain the same number of boots on the street, DeLaRosa says he doesn't support the first option.

"Cost savings doesn't always equal safety to the public," DeLaRosa said. "If we're top heavy then that would be one area that we need to look at. But

I'm a firm believer in the front-line safety officers."

Representatives from the Colton Police Officers Association, the city's police union, did not immediately return calls seeking comment.

The fire audit says forming a joint powers agreement with Grand Terrace, Loma Linda, Rialto and San Bernardino could save about \$2.6 million annually. The option is based on a complex concept that would require cooperation between all five jurisdictions, the audit says.



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Fire engineer Doug Blinkinsop, Colton's representative at San Bernardino County Professional Firefighters Local 935, the city's fire union, said the idea could work but he doubts the proposed cities would have the political will to make such an agreement happen.

"They have been done in the past," Blinkinsop said. "I think it's something that could potentially be studied, but I don't think people should get their hopes up that this is going to be the golden egg."

About \$800,000 could be saved if the city contracted with the San Bernardino County Fire Department for fire services, mainly because county firefighters are paid lower salaries than the city's, the audit says.

The proposed savings are inflated, Blinkinsop said. The audit didn't use the right salary figures for county firefighters, who also have a paramedics certification, and failed to include certain fees the county charges, Blinkinsop said.

Toro said he hopes, at the least, the audits will provide enough savings to pay for their \$288,000 cost. Under a best-case scenario, he hopes they will suggest substantial, long-term savings, Toro said.

The amount of money the audits save the city will depend on the action taken by the council. In addition to the contracting options, the reports contain various suggestions that San Francisco-based auditor Harvey M. Rose Associates says would allow the departments to operate more efficiently and produce hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings.

michael.sorba@inlandnewspapers.com, 909-386-3872

AUDIT PRESENTATION

Audits of the city's public safety departments and electric company will be presented during a 5:30 p.m. meeting Tuesday, at City Hall, 650 La Cadena Drive. A second meeting is planned at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday if more time is needed.

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