

Joe Moore: Hurdles ahead for Swarengin

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Now that the dust has settled following the Fresno City Council vote against Bus Rapid Transit, the implications of the move have become increasingly clear and suggest the next 35 months of Mayor Ashley Swarengin's term will be especially interesting.

The Jan. 31 vote marked Swarengin's second major political defeat in the last nine months, following the rejection by Fresno voters of Measure G, her residential solid waste outsourcing plan.

While it may be too early to label Swarengin a lame duck, the combined defeats certainly cost the mayor a significant amount of political capital. Both involved her core issues: fixing Fresno's finances by redefining the idea of an essential city service, and with BRT, advancing an ambitious "smart growth" agenda that seeks to curb sprawl and direct new growth inward.

The council vote on BRT also was the latest evidence of an evolving relationship with the legislative side of City Hall. In her first term, Swarengin enjoyed a City Council stacked with allies, such as Andreas Borgeas, Mike Dages and Larry Westerlund. Swarengin liked the latter so much, her administration recently hired him to lead the city's economic development team. While the mayor had her differences with previous councils, current members Clint Olivier, Steve Brandau, Paul Caprioglio and Sal Quintero have proven to be much more skeptical.

The council votes on Measure G and BRT also highlight Swarengin's unorthodox political positioning. While Fresno's elected offices are nonpartisan, the mayor is a Republican and enjoyed strong support from right-of-center voters in 2008 and 2012. But while she is fiscally conservative, her policies on everything from downtown revitalization to high-speed rail and urban planning have resulted in more than grumbling from some prominent local Republicans, especially those in the development community. Add in her frequent trips to Washington, D.C., to meet with President Obama to lobby for federal dollars for the city, and Swarengin the politician is hard to pigeonhole. That's presented a challenge in her efforts to develop a reliable voting block on the council, especially for big issues. The same council members who were the mayor's allies on privatizing residential solid waste proved to be her opponents in the fight over BRT and the general plan.

While the council will see at least one new face after this November's election, this current group likely will decide the fate of Swarengin's top projects, like the 2035 General Plan Update and the effort to revitalize the Fulton Mall.

The BRT vote effectively reopened the planning debate, after the council got buyer's remorse over the proposal to direct 45% of future residential growth to infill areas. Using the \$50 million in federal and state BRT funding as political leverage, the council majority is now in a position to negotiate with the administration to make the plan more developer friendly.

It may result in a reborn express bus service, but it could also tilt the balance of power when it comes to those who decide the city's future. The losers? They would be progressive activists and urban planners behind the "build in, not out" approach of the new general plan. The winners? They would be members of the local development community, who call the current infill rules unworkable. Fresno's developers rarely are on the losing end of a political fight.

As contentious as the BRT debate was, the Fulton Mall debate could be even tougher. There is no issue that Swearingin is more passionate about than downtown revitalization, and reintroducing vehicle traffic to the mall is the cornerstone of her downtown strategy.

And just like the federally funded BRT plan, the mayor has secured \$16 million from the Obama administration to pay for rebuilding Fulton Street. But after decades of downtown plans, some noble and some downright goofy (remember Alan Autry's proposal to dig up the streets for a network of fake canals he called "El Rio"?), one senses the public and the council could be cool to the idea of any city-led downtown initiative, whether it makes sense or not.

The intense focus on downtown already has alienated some council members who complain that their districts are being neglected.

Swearingin is smart, and recognizes this. In recent months, I've noticed a subtle shift in her language when it comes to revitalization. When she joined me for an extended interview on Valley Public Radio's "Valley Edition" a little over a month ago, she talked less about downtown's rebirth and more about an Autry-esque "tale of two cities" — except in her tale, the dividing line between poverty and prosperity has now moved north from Shaw Avenue to Herndon.

And last month, she told Gov. Jerry Brown how almost two-thirds of the city's census tracts are considered poverty areas. Her implication is clear, and it's directed both at voters and those on the dais: If the city continues with business as usual, in 10 years, Alluvial Avenue or even Shepherd Avenue may be the new dividing line.

Can Swearingin sell that message to the city, and the council? Can she link the problems that plague downtown with the overall health and direction of the community? Can she convince the people who enjoy a relaxed middle-class suburban lifestyle in north Fresno that a new vision is not just desired, but necessary? A vision that's very different, more like Portland than like Orange County? The next 35 months should be very interesting indeed.

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