

# **EDITORIAL: Fresno is Exhibit A of a city that is losing its middle class**

By The Bee Editorial Board

Fresno

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President Barack Obama will land in Fresno, the nation's 34th largest city with nearly 506,000 people, on Friday afternoon and meet with some of the region's farmers to discuss what can be done to mitigate the effects of California's historic drought.

It is expected that Obama will lend his support to drought-relief legislation introduced on Tuesday by U.S. Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer and Rep. Jim Costa — all fellow Democrats.

Based on the president's track record, he'll then step away from the situation and let Democratic and Republican leaders duke it out in coming days and weeks over what drought relief should entail.

Indeed, Obama's first visit to Fresno will be short. But if the president's schedule were to allow him to stay longer, he might find our region, its people and its economy worthy of more attention.

In fact, Obama might come to realize that Fresno and other Central Valley cities are Exhibit A for two linked things that he has spoken quite a bit about lately: the spread of income inequality and the need to rebuild America's shrinking middle class.

Understand: Fresno County is one of America's great melting pots. According to federal surveys, at least 66 languages are spoken here — everything from English and Spanish to Hmong, Punjabi, Armenian, Chinese, Yiddish and Apache.

Fresno was founded as a railroad and farming town in 1872 and soon became known as a place where immigrants could realize the American Dream. But the boom ended sometime back.

For many Fresno residents, life is about survival. We are challenged by poverty, gangs and homelessness.

As Fresno author Mark Arax wrote in an essay for The Bee last year: "We've designed an economy that provides no real competition to the farm. Each generation of farmer reaches deeper in the peasant heart of Mexico for his labor. Once here, the picker and the pruner and irrigator occupy a firm, but bottom rung on our economic ladder."

We've inflicted harm on ourselves with political infighting, lack of a coherent economic vision and, for much too long, nearly total indifference to the decline of our largest public school system, Fresno Unified.

But Fresno is striving today to turn things around and again see more of its citizens realize the fruits of hard work and prosperity.

It would mean much to Fresno County residents if Obama kept them in mind for the remainder of his presidency. He needs to see beyond what has brought him here — the drought — and peer into the heart of our city.

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