

Problems in Valley extend beyond drought, some would tell Obama

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California's drought has made it obvious that the state has major water problems -- and President Barack Obama's trip to Fresno is meant to address that issue.

But the view of some Fresnoans is that there's other problems here they would like the president to know about.

The Bee asked a local pastor, a business owner, a college professor and a developer this question: If you could spend five minutes with President Obama, what local problem would you ask him to help solve?

Their answers deal with poverty, crime, air pollution and growth.

The pastor

Rev. Booker T. Lewis II, a board member for Fresno's Faith in Community group and pastor of Rising Star Missionary Baptist Church in southwest Fresno, wants Obama to be aware of many issues plaguing the city: poverty, crime, a need for better education and jobs, and failing immigration policies and laws.

Lewis, who grew up in west Fresno, is the chair of a "night walk" effort -- leading church members on weekly walks through some of Fresno's poorest neighborhoods where crime is prevalent. The walks are intended to help reduce street violence.

"Fresno is a very segregated community," Lewis said. "We are segregated by economics ... we have the 'haves' and the community of 'have-nots.' ... People like to talk about our diversity. We have a lot of diversity, but along with diversity, we have a lot of segregation, and poverty is one of the symptoms of our segregation."

Fresno has 23 neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, he said, and that leads to crime and mass incarceration.

Lewis said he's afraid Obama is going to miss important opportunities to help the struggling region during his quick trip to Fresno.

"We have some huge issues in Fresno," Lewis said. "I think I would have liked to have seen him spend some time with some of the leaders in our city, in our county ... talking to us about how we could build better relationships with our federal government in addressing some of these issues."

The small business owner

Debbie Hunsaker, owner of Alert-O-Lite, a Fresno company that offers traffic-control services and construction and safety supplies, wants to talk about over-regulation of small businesses.

"As a business owner, I would like to ask him what is he going to do to help minimize the impact of all these rules and regulations and mandates that the government at the federal level and the state level keep imposing on small businesses," she said.

Regulations on businesses such as Alert-O-Lite take time, money and manpower to comply with, she said. And she's still wondering how the Affordable Care Act will affect her company.

Such regulations have a bigger impact on small businesses that don't have deep corporate pockets.

"What can our government do that will change the mentality from a 'gotcha' attitude to a 'how can we help you' or an education mind set?" she asks.

The Fresno State professor

Andrew Jones, a sociology professor at California State University, Fresno, said he would ask Obama to address Fresno's poor air quality.

"If one thinks about all the issues connected to our air quality, it becomes apparent that addressing that problem could ameliorate many others, especially the health of all the citizenry who experience respiratory problems and related ailments," he said.

Addressing Fresno's air quality is a must, Jones said, as this has a direct impact on people's life chances.

"Looking at California, life expectancy for those in the Bay Area averages to 85.3 years compared to those of us who live in Fresno and surrounding areas, which averages to 76.1 years," said Jones, referring to the report, "A Portrait of California" published in 2011.

Improving air quality not only has positive health effects but would also be a morale boost for residents, he said.

Jones would ask Obama to address this issue either through executive order, by getting Congress to designate federal funding, or by putting pressure on the state Legislature.

"Anything he could do as an advocate or through his own actions would be tremendous benefit to Fresno," he said.

The developer

Darius Assemi hopes the president's trip to Fresno will shine a national spotlight on not only water but also on challenges like poverty and air quality.

The president of Granville Homes, who is also a downtown developer and is working to build a pharmacy school in the Fresno foothills, has a list of things he would like the president to do to in Fresno.

The first is to "work with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to make sure we have a reliable source of water for Central Valley cities and farmers," said Assemi, whose family also farms almonds and pistachios in the Valley.

"We want to have a reliable water source and want to have clean, safe water for all of our Valley residents, he said. "Water equals jobs and growth. Without water, we can't do anything."

No. 2 is to work with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to create easy access to capital for infill housing projects in Fresno and Clovis.

Then, Assemi said he would like the feds to provide a couple hundred million dollars in grants to convert Fresno's public buses and school district buses into electric vehicles to improve the environment.

And there's the poverty issue. Fresno is among the poorest cities in the nation.

"Hopefully he will get a chance to see the poverty in our area and address it with incentives for job creation."

Or better yet, Assemi jokes, why not establish a west coast capital in Fresno.

"Imagine the kind of business that could flow in and out of Fresno."

The White House late Thursday afternoon announced the schedule for President Barack Obama's visit to the Fresno area today:

<SC120,116>He will fly from Andrews Air Force Base and arrive at Fresno Yosemite International Airport at 2:30 p.m. He will then travel to Firebaugh and go to the San Luis Water Facility for a meeting with community leaders.

<SC120,116>At 4:15 p.m. Obama will tour a farm in the Los Banos area, and at 4:30 he will deliver some remarks. He arrives back at Fresno Yosemite International after 5 p.m. and departs at 5:35.

<SC120,116>An hour later, he is to arrive in Palm Springs, where he will later meet with the king of Jordan.

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