

Swearingin: Obama's Strong Cities program is working in Fresno

By George Hostetter

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President Barack Obama will have a local policy success to brag about today even if he doesn't bring rain.

Obama in 2011 named Fresno as one of the original seven cities to participate in the pilot Strong Cities, Strong Communities program. The goal was to create a closer partnership between the feds and struggling cities.

City officials say SC2, as it's typically called, has helped Fresno land \$23 million in federal grants, including nearly \$16 million to help pay for a possible return of cars to downtown's Fulton Corridor.

SC2 experts, among other things, also are helping City Hall plan for a downtown high-speed rail station and assisting the Downtown Fresno Partnership in turning the city's core into a dynamic hub.

Obama is scheduled to arrive in Fresno in the early afternoon to discuss water issues with regional leaders. Mayor Ashley Swearingin says she'd love to have a few minutes with the President to tell him about the program's value to Fresno's challenged neighborhoods.

SC2 "has proven to be an effective model for local government to work better with the federal government," Swearingin said. "It has worked really well in Fresno."

The other cities in SC2's first group are Chester, Pa., Youngstown, Ohio, Detroit, Cleveland, Memphis and New Orleans. They were picked because of their economic need, strong local leadership and solid recovery plans. There was no application process.

SC2's premise is simple. Federal programs for cities can get bogged down in red tape. SC2 helps cities cut through the mess.

Too often, U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan said during SC2's roll-out nearly three years ago, "the federal government has been part of the problem, rather than part of the solution."

Swearingin in a recent interview said SC2 is like a bridge between federal possibilities and local needs.

"Without that bridge we were missing a lot of opportunities," she said. "We weren't spending federal dollars as efficiently as we should have. We weren't receiving some dollars that we think we should have received."

At least one federal official is usually embedded in City Hall. Others make periodic visits here. Others, based in agencies elsewhere in the nation, are assigned to Fresno's needs.

The existence of all these advocates doesn't mean Fresno gets "a blank check," Swearingin said. But it does mean the city has "coaches" in its corner when it comes to deciphering federal rules and honing competitive grant applications, she said.

"We're now better conditioned to compete for those grants," the mayor said.

SC2 experts in Fresno have also:

- Worked with local agencies and nonprofits on ways to end homelessness.
- Helped with the planting of trees and the building of a community garden in the Lowell neighborhood near downtown.
- Assisted with planning for the Bus Rapid Transit system.
- Provided expertise on a grant application to study expansion of the value-added food sector (Fresno received \$95,000).

The Obama Administration announced last month a second round of SC2 cities: Brownsville, Texas; Flint, Mich.; Gary, Ind.; Macon, Ga.; Rockford, Ill.; St. Louis, Mo.; and Rocky Mount, N.C.

Swearingin said there's no guarantee SC2 will continue when Obama's term ends in January, 2017.

"We're just trying to get as much accomplished as possible while we have this partnership in place," she said.

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