

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin on seeking state office: 'I really love public service'

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By George Hostetter

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Ashley Swearengin says the lure of public service, not ambition, is fueling her run for the state controller's job barely a year after she took the oath for her second term as Fresno's mayor.

"I really love public service," Swearengin said Thursday. "It is extremely complicated and challenging. And when you get a win in the public service arena, it benefits all the people you represent."

Swearengin said her professional love is the private sector.

"But when you get a win in the private sector, it doesn't benefit as many people," Swearengin said. "That, to me, is why I have chosen the public service route -- the victories actually benefit a lot of people. But I'm not wedded to the idea of public service as the only fulfilling professional path for me. We'll see what happens."

Others at City Hall are viewing Swearengin's decision to seek higher office with three years left in her term with less idealism.

Dee Barnes, president of the Fresno City Employees Association, the city's white-collar union, said Swearengin could cost Fresno's troubled general fund big bucks should she be elected.

The primary is in June, the general election in November. Swearengin is a Republican in a strongly Democratic state. Should she win, the city could have to pay for at least one special election to fill her job.

"Too many politicians now are always looking to their political future and don't think about the commitment they made to voters," Barnes said. "As a citizen, I expect elected politicians to do the job they were elected to do. If they're busy campaigning for another position, they should resign their position. That's not just her. That applies to all politicians."

City Council members, perhaps deciding it best not to burn any bridges in their own political futures, said voters should cut Swearengin some slack.

"I was very happy for the mayor," Council Member Paul Caprioglio said. "She has an opportunity to be recognized for all the good things she's done for the city of Fresno. If the mayor or anyone has an opportunity to fulfill their destiny, they should take it."

Council President Steve Brandau said he thought Swearengin would look for a new job before her term was up.

Even so, "I didn't think she'd look with three years left," Brandau said. "That's interesting."

Council Member Blong Xiong said Fresno's municipal affairs will be in good hands should Swearengin move to Sacramento.

"There are seven others here who were elected," Xiong said. "There shouldn't be chaos."

Council Member Sal Quintero said a strong fight even in possible defeat will help Swearengin's political career.

"She still has an office for another two years to give her visibility," Quintero said. "That could be a launching pad for a run at another office."

Council Member Clint Olivier said a losing campaign, if that happens, won't harm Swearengin's effectiveness at City Hall. Her post-election ability to move legislation through the council "will carry the same seriousness," he said.

Council Member Oliver Baines said it's unwise in this era of term limits to assume promising politicians should stay in one spot until unemployed.

"I think the mayor is a tremendous public servant," Baines said. "I wish her the best."

Council Member Lee Brand said Wednesday that he has long planned to run for mayor, and would do so if a special election occurs.

City Hall is full of unfinished business, almost all of it coming from Swearengin. The transformation of Fulton Mall back to Fulton Street must survive another council vote. The 2035 general plan update, years in the making, is about to land on the council dais. Labor-management relations are tense. No one is talking bankruptcy these days, but the budget is far from healthy.

Swearengin vows to tackle all these challenges while campaigning in a state that stretches from Oregon to Mexico. Time management is key, she said.

"I am used to having a lot of irons in the fire," Swearengin said. "The good news is we've resolved some fairly significant issues that have required a lot of my time in recent months and years. I do find myself with some bandwidth in off hours to take on a new challenge."

Swearengin said she'll run her campaign from a small office near City Hall.

"I anticipate being in City Hall way more than being on the campaign trail," she said.

Swearingin said she spent a lot of time in her first term on management as well as leadership. She said she now has a senior team of talented executives in place to execute her policies.

"We're at a point as a team where I can spend my time on the leadership side," Swearingin said.

Almost from the day she took office in January 2009, Swearingin has said she needed eight years to finish her job.

"I would love to be the mayor of Fresno every day for the rest of my life," Swearingin said. "I love this job. I love this city. It is my heart and soul. The reality is I'm in a term-limited position. And I believe in term limits.

"The passion of my life prior to becoming mayor, as mayor and post-mayor has been and will always be helping to see the economy change in Fresno and Central California and the parts of the state that don't participate in the robust economic conditions of the coastal areas. I have some key resources to lend to that effort as mayor, but there's going to be a point where I no longer have that opportunity to lead as mayor.

"The office of the controller is an often overlooked position that, frankly, often has more to do with the business climate and economic competitiveness than almost any other position in the state, second to the governor and leaders of the Legislature."

Swearingin said running the controller's office is a way to continue the work she began some 10 years ago as an executive with the Regional Jobs Initiative.

Swearingin said there are two paths in her future -- private sector and public service.

"I'm not sure which one I'll be on three or four years from now," she said. "I'm OK with either way. I enjoy public service very much. But if that ends up not being the path I'm on a few years down the road, that's absolutely OK with me."

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