

# Fresno City Council Member Steve Brandau, Central Valley Tea Party at odds

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Fresno City Council Member Steve Brandau

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As a Fresno City Council candidate, Steve Brandau was an active member of the Central Valley Tea Party. Then he got elected to the council, and now some of his votes don't sit well with tea party colleagues.

That's the difference between sitting on the sidelines, and having to cast votes each week on a variety of issues that affect constituents of all political philosophies.

"I would label it a family issue," said Carole Jacoby, a local real estate agent and conservative Republican.

She, like other conservatives, said she was frustrated with Brandau's vote to open the Fulton Mall to traffic. His support of the city's water-infrastructure improvements, which means higher rates for city water users, also made some of his conservative supporters unhappy.

Some on the right see Brandau's votes as evidence he has joined the political mainstream, where compromise and ambition trump conservative principles.

"I think that every single politician is looking to climb the (political) ladder, and we don't want tea party people to be climbing any ladder," Jacoby said.

Anti-tax advocate Steve Wayte, who helped form the Central Valley Tea Party and who campaigned for Brandau, now says he has been ostracized from the organization.

Wayte says Brandau has sold out the tea party principles in support of Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin's agenda, and has been too influenced by fellow Council Member Lee Brand.

"What's frustrating for me is I must have knocked on 3,000 doors for that guy," Wayte said. "I think he's willing to do anything he can to get re-elected, or what Lee Brand and Ashley tell him to do."

Brandau has heard the criticism. He knew — and even acknowledged — that his "yes" votes on a handful of actions to remake the six-block Fulton Mall back into Fulton Street would make some supporters unhappy.

But Brandau also says he is not the same person who took office 14 months ago, when at a District 2 candidate forum he said "no more connecting the taxpayer to money pits; we're at the point where we can deal only with essential services."

"It's one thing to be in office as opposed to outside of office," he said. "Now that I'm inside, I see that the decisions are much more complex, and there's a lot of information that when I was on the outside looking in I wasn't privy to."

Brand defended Brandau, and said his new council colleague has proven himself to be a capable advocate for his district and the city.

It's easy for "armchair politicians" to question City Hall decisions, Brand said. It's another thing to read the research and engineering reports and then reach an informed decision and take a vote that might anger a vocal constituency.

"Steve proved he wasn't a one-dimensional guy — a standard bearer for conservative causes," Brand said. "He works for the city of Fresno. He doesn't work for the tea party. His constituents elected him, not one specific interest group."

To be sure, the anger at Brandau isn't universal among his core supporters.

Like others such as Wayte and Jacoby, Fresno businessman and Central Valley Tea Party media coordinator Serafin Quintanar doesn't like some of Brandau's votes — or those of Brand and fellow Council Member Clint Olivier. But he still is standing by Brandau.

"I am disappointed with Clint and Steve and Lee," Quintanar said. "But I will not say Steve sold out just because of Fulton Mall. That's not far enough for me."

The Fulton Mall project is pegged at \$20 million, but will use no general fund money. Tea party supporters, however, point out that the \$15.9 million construction grant is federal tax money. And, local or federal, tax money is still tax money.

Brandau's vote, some tea party activists say, doesn't align with its principles, such as limited government, personal enterprise and free markets.

But Brandau said it was imperative to give the Fulton Mall a chance, and opening the mall to traffic will allow the free market to come in and try to revive what was once Fresno's main street.

"I believe every vote that I've taken I have made a conservative case for that vote," he said. "Sometimes it's not what another person's definition of conservative is."

The issue with onetime Brandau ally Wayte is especially touchy, as he and Doug Vagim are in a legal battle with the city over the new water rates. Wayte and Vagim are leading the fight to put the new rates to a popular vote.

Wayte was unhappy that Brandau accompanied Brand recently when Brand asked the Fresno County Republican Party not to endorse the water-rate referendum. The Fresno County GOP voted to support the vote.

It was more evidence, Wayte said, that Brandau was backing off his tea party principles.

"When I see you wavering, I am going to call you out," Wayte said.

Wayte, Jacoby and other tea party conservatives worried that Brandau would also become a supporter of the Bus Rapid Transit project after Swearingin tweaked her proposal and cut its price tag.

Buses would be shorter, for instance, and passengers would board at curb level, not from platforms. The cost is about \$13 million less than the original proposal, which was defeated by a 4-3 vote.

On Thursday, Brandau — even though he was part of an in-house panel that came up with the new Bus Rapid Transit plan — was the lone "no" vote on moving the project forward. He said he isn't convinced there is sufficient demand.

It's all part, Brandau said, of his effort to study each issue and vote in the best interest of Fresno — even if it is a vote he might not want to cast.

"I have a constituency that believes in me and they want me to vote every single time their way, (but) at the end of the day that's not my job now," Brandau said. "I'm getting paid to think on the behalf of 70,000 people in District 2, and 550,000 people in the city of Fresno, and that's what informs my decision, so if occasionally I don't please some people that want to hold me to some high standard, I'm OK with that."

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