

# Fresno Mayor Swarengin hires media spokesman seasoned in politics

BY JOHN ELLIS AND GEORGE HOSTETTER

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Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin is turning to a seasoned media professional and key Republican political spokesman to help push her administration's agenda as she enters the home stretch leading California's fifth-largest city.

Mark Standriff, 56, is communications director for the California Republican Party. Now he'll leave that job to become the city's director of communications and public affairs.

His last day with the California Republican Party will be April 18. His first day with the city will be the following Monday, April 21.

Swarengin has tapped Standriff as some key decisions loom and she works to cement her legacy with a handful of high-profile city projects, including reopening the Fulton Mall to vehicular traffic after 50 years.

She's also in the midst of running as a Republican for state controller, with a primary looming June 3.

Swarengin on Tuesday called Standriff a "great utility player," a communications expert who understands the digital revolution and social media as well as traditional media such as print, TV and radio.

Swarengin said Standriff will make \$125,000 a year. The city's last spokesman, Michael Lukens, earned \$65,352 a year.

She said Standriff will be paid more because he has more duties. He will fill two key roles.

First, he will get out the word on the range of services offered by a municipal corporation with a \$1 billion annual budget.

Second, he will challenge story lines that are viewed by the administration as wrong.

Standriff is sure to receive a cool reception in some quarters of city government. For example, Fresno Police Officers Association President Jacky Parks took one look at Standriff's salary and deemed it "disappointing."

Parks said it makes no sense to spend that kind of money on a communications expert when general fund services such as public safety and parks have yet to recover from the Great Recession.

"There is a definite feeling among city employees that they're not appreciated by city leaders," Parks said. "The city leaders don't understand that the employees are angry."

Whether Standriff delivers and defends Swearingin's agenda for nine months or 33 months depends on how she fares in her bid to become state controller. The election is this November. But Standriff said he will play no role in her statewide campaign. He will, technically speaking he said, be working for the city and for City Manager Bruce Rudd, and not Swearingin.

Still, it was Swearingin who sought him out, Standriff said.

"I was approached by the mayor through recommendations by other people. I'm at a point in my life and my career that I have to think about what is best for my family and my future. When this opportunity came, it was too good to turn down."

Standriff said he's approaching the position as a long-term job. His wife and his daughter, who will be a high school freshman this fall, are moving from Sacramento this summer. His son is graduating from high school in June.

Standriff said he sees a lot of work to be done to improve the city's communications, from improving the website to writing a new communications plan to putting together an emergency plan. He also plans to pay more attention to social media.

"Things that need to be brought up to date," he said.

City Hall's communications office has had its ups and downs since Fresno went to a strong mayor system in 1997. Alan Autry in his eight years as mayor (2001-2009) went through a small army of media representatives. Swearingin began her first term with a director of communications (Randy Reed) and a press secretary (Michael Lukens).

Reed was making \$99,000 a year when he resigned in early 2011, a time of budget deficits. The administration at the time was eliminating communications specialists throughout the organization.

Lukens became the administration's sole spokesman until he resigned in late 2013 to pursue a full-time teaching career.

Vikkie Calderon has temporarily moved from airports to serve as City Hall spokeswoman.

Swearengin has occasionally talked about what she sees as the pivotal role of communications experts at Fresno City Hall.

Nearly everyone these days is a reporter, Swearengin said. The amount of competing information or opinion on City Hall events is enormous and instantly available, she said. An effective mayoral agenda must be able to complement this flow of news and, where necessary, instantly push against what the city's chief executive sees as erroneous comment, she said.

City officials circled this issue in 2010 during charter review committee hearings. There was brief talk about authorizing the mayor's office to hire its own legal counsel rather than depend solely on a city attorney who is hired and fired by the City Council. The thinking in part was that a mayor needs her own high-profile advocate in political battles that invariably turn on public opinion. Nothing came of the idea.

Standriff's arrival at City Hall reflects another turn in Swearengin's thinking. It helps that city finances are looking up. The city two years ago was hustling to avoid insolvency. While money remains tight, upcoming budget hearings will focus on more mundane issues such as the proper size of a reserve.

Standriff is a native of Ohio who moved to Sacramento a little more than a decade ago for a job in radio. Since then, he's done various jobs in communications as well as his "parallel career" in theater. He's a longtime actor and also did announcing for the River Cats, Sacramento's minor league baseball team.

This isn't his first job as a city spokesman. He was public information officer in Toledo, Ohio.

In 2010, he was named communications director for the California Republican Party.

He then went to work as spokesman for Elizabeth Emken, who sought to unseat Sen. Dianne Feinstein in 2012, and this year is one of three Republicans seeking to oust incumbent Democratic Rep. Ami Bera of Elk Grove.

Standriff came back to the state communications director post full-time in September.

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