

Ashley Swearengin: We must keep Fresno informed

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BY ASHLEY SWEARENGIN

Fresno

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Fresno has undergone tremendous changes in the past six years. Intensive planning and restructuring have created a more streamlined and economically viable city government that is efficient with taxpayer dollars.

Having a strong, open and active communications plan is essential when making these changes. More importantly, having an informed population is important to any democracy and helps deter those who might spread misinformation to benefit their own agenda.

That's why, as our budget continues to stabilize, we've finally filled the long-vacant position of director of communications and public affairs.

Communications for the fifth-largest city in California involves much more than writing a press release, talking to reporters or drafting an op-ed. Today, Fresnoans get their information from a variety of sources, and the ability to understand and manage the rapidly growing number of communication channels has become a specialized skill set.

The Fresno Bee editorial board should recognize that as well as anyone, as their industry continues to experience downsizing in an age driven by technology that is constantly changing.

I chose the right person to meet those challenges. After offering the director of communications position to three local candidates over a six-month period with no success, I found Mark Standriff, an accomplished, talented communicator with a national reputation for excellence and integrity.

He has not been hired to be a "spokesman" — the term used in a Bee editorial Thursday. Nor is he replacing the city's recently retired press secretary, Mike Lukens. Rather, he is filling the position of communications director once held by Randy Reed, which includes a much wider and more

demanding list of responsibilities and has remained vacant for too long because of budget shortfalls.

Now that the city's budget is stabilizing and the negative fund balances are on track to be paid off earlier, there is an opportunity to fill one of our vacant public information positions and upgrade the city's communications, both internally and externally. Our city website is old, hard to navigate, and has outdated information. We have not had a current communications plan since 2006. Our entire system of communicating from department to citizen, as well as from department to department, needs a complete overhaul.

Among cities in California with populations over 300,000, Fresno is the only one that does not have an official communications director or public information officer.

The city of Sacramento, which has almost 40,000 fewer people, has a communications staff of five, and Mayor Kevin Johnson has his own press secretary. Long Beach has a public information officer in addition to a spokesperson for its mayor. Even the city of Bakersfield, a much smaller city than Fresno with a population of 360,000, has eight communications staffers.

In fact, among the 50 largest cities in the nation, Fresno, at No. 34, is the only one without a communications director. As a result, our city has been terribly deficient in providing proper information services to our residents.

Mark will create and direct a communications effort that will reach the people of Fresno and keep them informed about the activities of their city government. That's a benefit to everyone, and it's a shame that he's being attacked before he's had the chance to prove himself.

I urge Fresnans to welcome Mark and provide the constructive feedback he needs to make the necessary changes in City Hall's community outreach.

It's ironic that union leaders who are the most vocal against this move are also those who have opposed the successful pro-taxpayer, pro-economic growth decisions that the city has been making.

The bottom line is that having a robust, well-rounded and effective communications system that keeps the citizens of Fresno fully informed benefits everyone. Democracies thrive on an open, transparent government. That starts with good communications.

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Ashley Swearingin is the mayor of Fresno.

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