

Fresno City Hall seeks to be more business friendly

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By George Hostetter



Fresno City Hall in downtown Fresno, photographed Friday, Jan. 31, 2014.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

Work proceeds slowly but steadily on making things faster and easier for businesses trying to grapple with Fresno City Hall bureaucracy.

The City Council on Thursday got a 90-minute update on the progress of Mayor Ashley Swearingin's Business Friendly Fresno Initiative.

Members of the task force charged with turning the initiative's name into reality said a new era for job-producing development is coming to City Hall.

"We'll never be satisfied with the status quo," planning director Jennifer Clark said. "We always want to be the best."

The update made agonizingly clear that project approval in a society of competing interests is mind-numbingly complex. How to balance developers' competitive need for speed with the public's demand for proper caution?

Task force members said some tips are already in action. For example, a development review committee

launched in January has already reviewed 61 projects, fast-tracking eight of them.

Clark said her department's culture is changing. The public's legal protections remain in place, she said. An super-charged, business-friendly attitude is to be found everywhere, she said.

Swearengin said the city must invest in better computer software and more planning department staff. The prospect of private-sector jobs is at stake, she said.

It could be months before the task force's work is felt in the planning department and several years before its full effects are obvious, city officials said.

It'll be worth the wait, City Manager Bruce Rudd said. He noted that Fresno in recent years has been compared unfavorably to difficult planning pipelines in other cities.

"We want to be in a situation where we will become the model," Rudd said.

Council President Steve Brandau, a task force member, said he's hearing mixed reviews from the business community.

"I am keeping my fingers crossed that we can complete the overhaul," Brandau said.

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