

Fresno City Council members want to double their special fund

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By George Hostetter

Steve Brandau

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Some on the Fresno City Council want direct control over more of the city's money.

Their vehicle to do this: the controversial council infrastructure fund.

Council President Steve Brandau on Tuesday asked that next year's budget include another \$50,000 for each council district's infrastructure fund. Council Member Lee Brand seconded the idea.



Mayor Ashley Swearengin in her proposed budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1 is offering \$50,000 per council district. Brandau's motion would bump the amount to \$100,000 each.

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Brandau said neighborhoods throughout Fresno need sidewalks repaired, potholes filled, trees trimmed. He said service requests occasionally fall through the cracks at an overworked public works department.

"You hear all the time about things not getting done in a timely fashion," Brandau said. "This will allow us to aim like a laser at some of the needs and get them done."

The council will vote on this and other budget motions by the end of the month.

The council infrastructure fund is a creature of the strong mayor government. There was no need for it when Fresno had a council-city manager system. If the council wanted a pothole filled on Elm Street, it ordered the city manager to do it. Since the city manager was hired and fired by the council, that was enough.

That changed when Fresno voters in the 1990s gave chief executive powers to the mayor. The council and mayor were equals, but the latter had sole authority over day-to-day operations.

Infrastructure -- bureaucratic lingo for things like street maintenance -- falls into that category.

Jim Patterson became Fresno's first strong mayor in 1997. Council members soon found a way to regain some of their former spending clout. The council with a veto-proof five votes can do as it pleases in crafting a budget. The council hit on the idea of giving each of its members a pot of money designated "infrastructure" funds plus the authority to spend it within public works on specific projects.

Early critics dubbed it a "slush" fund, saying the cash enabled council members to reward supporters by fulfilling pet requests.

The executive branch faced a different calculus. Mayors said council requests interfered with public works' priorities. On the other hand, mayors need happy council members.

Council infrastructure funds over the years developed certain traits.

Councils have struggled to rein in the definition of infrastructure. Some council members claimed people are infrastructure and tried to spend the money on organizations.

Councils found it hard to rein in their appetites. If \$50,000 is good for Fresno and \$100,000 better, why not even more? Some councils followed this thinking.

And while the council can vote itself all the infrastructure money it wants, it's still the mayor and city manager who control public works. There were years where council members' infrastructure requests mysteriously collected dust on someone's desk. Requests were carried from one year to the next.

Council members screamed. It did no good.

Budget hearings resume Wednesday morning with public utilities.

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