

Fresno City Council chews on details of \$1 billion budget

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George Hostetter

Steve Brandau

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Fresno City Council members thundered about spending for three hours on Monday, but it was their silence on a key issue that spoke volumes.

Fresno, it appears, is ready to salt away some cash for emergencies.

The council voted on about a dozen motions to change Mayor Ashley Swearengin's proposed \$1 billion spending plan for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

A sometimes divided council rejected a bump to members' infrastructure fund, added \$1 million to the street-maintenance kitty and approved a reorganization of the fire department's building-inspection program.

These and other decisions added about \$1 million of spending to Swearengin's \$286.4 million general fund budget. No one seemed worried about making ends meet, in part because budget-making in Fresno is a year-around exercise.

The budget is supposed to go to Swearengin before the end of the month. But past budgets have sometimes stewed in City Hall's political pot late into the summer. And in Fresno, a charter city with considerable authority to change its mind, budgets can be revamped throughout the year with a veto-proof five council votes.

This explains why Monday's debates were full of noise but generally lacked heat.

Fire inspections produced the most talk and, perhaps inevitably, the most confusion.

Council President Steve Brandau, with a second from Council Member Clint Olivier, proposed the transfer of two inspectors to the Development and Resource Management Department. Their duties -- inspection of new residential housing -- would be unchanged.

Brandau also wanted the elimination of four positions charged with inspecting commercial buildings not covered by state inspection mandates.

Dozens of themes collided: Inspection costs, general fund subsidies, public safety, firefighter safety, redundant inspections, business-friendly climates, insurance company diligence, business-owner greed, business-owner burdens, labor-contract protection, political grandstanding, to name only a few.



Fire Chief Kerri Donis opposed Brandau's motion. Swearingin's proposed budget supports Donis' inspection plans. City Manager Bruce Rudd made no effort to fight Brandau and Olivier.

Brandau won the day on a 4-3 vote, with Council Members Blong Xiong, Oliver Baines and Sal Quintero voting no. Donis declined to comment after the meeting. Her grim demeanor almost certainly means this isn't over.

Brandau last week moved to double each council district's infrastructure fund (money spent at council member discretion on things like potholes) to \$100,000. He withdrew the motion on Monday, saying his motion to add \$1 million to street maintenance makes his original idea irrelevant.

Council Member Paul Caprioglio picked up Brandau's discarded motion and pitched it as his own. He said the extra money would help council members address constituent needs beyond missing asphalt.

Caprioglio's motion failed, 4-3. Caprioglio, Xiong and Baines were on the losing side. The vote gave Brandau the distinction, no doubt rare in City Hall budget history, of proposing, yanking and killing the same idea in less than a week.

The extra \$1 million for street maintenance (in addition to the \$2 million in Swearingin's budget) sailed through. Olivier cast the lone no vote. Brandau said the additional \$1 million will be divided evenly among the seven council districts.

The council on a 4-3 vote (Brandau, Olivier, Lee Brand no) added a bicycle police unit to the Tower District. The council added a police report-writing office to the El Dorado Park neighborhood near Fresno State.

Such district-specific partisanship with the budget did not please Brand. His scolding fell on deaf ears.

So ended more than a week of budget hearings. Nobody raised a peep of protest or interest in Swearingin's plans to build a general fund reserve. This rainy-day pot now holds barely a \$1 million. They mayor wants it to grow to nearly \$30 million in five years.

Unless there's a late council counter-attack, Swearingin is on her way to a strategic victory in the charting of Fresno's future. Monday's council meeting, loud though it was, constituted mere details.

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