

# Oliver Baines holding Fresno tax initiative in reserve -- for now

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Oliver Baines

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Oliver Baines wants consumers to give a big funding boost to Fresno's basic services.

But the Fresno City Council member has two challenges.

He's got to pick the best time to bring forward what figures to be a political hot potato.

He's facing a City Hall skeptic who happens to wield a veto pen -- Mayor Ashley Swearengin.

Baines has prepared a draft of Measure R, a proposed ballot initiative that would boost the city's sales tax by a half-cent to pay for the restoration of services such as public safety, parks and street maintenance.

A half-cent hike would mean \$1 in extra taxes on a \$200 taxable purchase. The tax would generate an estimated \$37 million annually.

"I know people don't get out of bed in the morning saying they want higher taxes," Baines said. "But I also know Fresnoans will tax themselves for things they believe in. They want answers on how to make our city better. I believe Measure R could be one of those answers."

Council Member Sal Quintero supports Baines, saying the city must find a way quickly to replenish the depleted ranks of police and fire.

"The sales tax is a good way because everyone pays it," Quintero said.

Swearengin said there are better ways to achieve a worthy goal.

"While we all recognize the need to increase staffing levels for police and fire, it's just as important to recognize the problems that arise when we depend on raising taxes to artificially create revenue," Swearengin said. "Instead, let's work together to start creating more taxpayers so that Fresno's fiscal future is stronger and everyone benefits."

Baines is dealing with several sources of pressure.

Fresno isn't in danger of going bankrupt, he said, but the city is service insolvent.

Blame the Great Recession. It hit as Baines took office in 2009 and led to a four-year cut of city services as revenues, dependent on sales and property taxes, plummeted. Three details help tell the story: The police force lost 150 sworn officers to attrition; parks depended on volunteers for upkeep; driving city



streets at times was like being in the Baja 500.

This year's general fund budget (money spent at the city's discretion) shows signs of vigor. But the encouraging trend line, Baines said, is not steep enough to restore past cuts with the necessary swiftness.

Baines has said for several years that Fresno doesn't have a spending problem, it has a revenue problem. He vowed to find more money, sometimes suggesting a sales tax hike. The big step was putting words to promise.

Measure R, according to Baines' documents, would boost Fresno's sales tax from 8.225% to 8.725%. According to the documents, that compares to 9% in Long Beach, 8.725% in Reedley, 8.225% in Clovis and 7.5% in Bakersfield.

Details aren't set in stone at this early stage, but Measure R could go for six years before returning for voter renewal.

The money would go into the general fund. A citizens oversight committee would review how the money is spent. Measure R proceeds would be audited annually by an independent auditor.

The City Council and the mayor would have the final say on where the money goes.

Baines said more than 80 California cities have adopted local sales tax hikes to supplement their operations.

The biggest pressure on Baines is politics. He wanted to bring his idea to the council in July, then took a hard look at the November ballot.

Measure Z, the tenth-of-a-cent Fresno County sales tax that supports Chaffee Zoo, is up for renewal. Measure W, a proposed initiative on whether to approve higher water rates to fund Swearingin's planned \$410 million water system upgrade, also appeared likely to go to voters in the fall.

Baines figured adding Measure R to that list was too much for voters to stomach, so he decided to temporarily park his idea.

Then the City Council on Thursday repealed the rate hikes, making Measure W irrelevant while throwing Fresno's water politics into turmoil. The council's next scheduled meeting is Aug. 21 -- past the deadline for getting something on the November ballot.

The right time for Baines might come in 2015. Swearingin is running for state controller in November. A victory means Fresno would face a special election early next year to select her successor.

Baines might be sitting in the mayor's chair at that time. The council president would become Fresno's chief executive until the new mayor is sworn in. Steve Brandau has the president's job now. Baines is slated to succeed him in January.

A mayoral contest and Measure R all by themselves on the same ballot -- Baines said that would be an off-year election to remember.

"We should have a meaningful conversation on something so important to the future of Fresno," Baines said of his proposal. "We owe our citizens that much."

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