

Giants rumors are making life hard for GOP hopeful

By John
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Chukchansi Park in Fresno when it opened in 2002. Lance Iversen/The Chronicle

It's tough for a big-city mayor to be elected to statewide office, and [Republican Ashley Swearingin](#) of Fresno is finding out exactly why.

The San Francisco Giants are [rumored to be moving their Pacific Coast League affiliate](#) from Fresno to Sacramento, where the [Rivercats have just told the Oakland A's minor league franchise to take a hike](#).

It might seem that the mayor, a candidate for state controller, doesn't have much to do with a private company's decision to relocate. That would be wrong.

Like every high-visibility mayor, Swearingin is the public face of her city, taking the credit when things go well and getting the blame when things don't.

"Mayors don't have the luxury of just taking positions on issues," said Corey Cook, an associate professor of politics at the University of San Francisco. "They have to govern."

[Chukchansi Park](#), Fresno's \$46 million, 12,500-seat downtown stadium, opened in 2002, long before Swearingin was first elected mayor in 2008. But the stadium, and the money-losing Fresno Grizzlies, have been a symbol of the city's financial woes and a recurrent headache for Swearingin.

The city-owned stadium, typically filled to about half capacity for Grizzly games, has never sparked the type of downtown development Fresno leaders had hoped for. And while the team officially pays \$1.5 million a year in rent to the city, a 2009 deal that Swearingin helped negotiate provided the team with city subsidies that essentially cut that in half. Even so, the Grizzlies still owe the city about \$1 million in back rent.

Swearingin still harbors hopes that the land around the stadium will be developed, and the city still needs that Grizzlies rent to help make the \$3.5 million yearly payment on the construction bonds that paid for the stadium.

The mayor says she's been talking with Giants officials in an effort to keep the club's bush leaguers in town. She's also talking with the Grizzlies about city-paid improvements to the stadium and surrounding area, as well as the possibility of another rent reduction.

Unlike [Betty Yee](#), her Democratic opponent for controller, Swearingin has to be out front and visible on every issue affecting her city, even those she really can't do much about. While Yee's job running California's tax system as one of four members of the state Board of Equalization doesn't make her many friends, she can always throw up her hands to irate taxpayers and say, "The Legislature made me do it."

"Mayors rarely advance (to higher office) because they have one of the few jobs where they have a real scorecard," said Eric Jaye, a Democratic consultant from San Francisco. "The streets are either clean or they're not. The city is losing jobs or it's not. Mayors have to make real decisions every day that are going to make some people unhappy."

Swearingin needs to find a solution to the baseball problem in hurry, both for Fresno and for her own political future. If the Grizzlies flee, leaving the city with a less-attractive minor league affiliate than the Giants' Triple-A team, it won't do anything for attendance — or Fresno's bottom line.

Speaking in Sacramento last month, Swearingin said one of the reasons to choose her for controller is her experience as a mayor, "where I was the one person who would take the rap for what happens, good or bad."

Unfortunately, those bad parts are way easier for people — and voters — to remember.

