

City beat: Thoughts on the Chief and the Mayor



THE CITY BEAT

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Posted by George Hostetter on December 3, 2014

I hate to admit it, but I'm confused. Fresno City Hall did it to me. This is a bad state of affairs, me being The Bee's City Hall reporter.

I had a chat about this with Doug Beeman, one of my editors. This is what I told Doug:

* First, I apologized for the random nature of my thoughts.

* Then I brought up police Chief Jerry Dyer's Wednesday news conference at the Fresno Memorial Auditorium. Dyer reported that, as of Monday, there had been 29 shootings in Fresno in the preceding three weeks. He also noted that there had been 38 shootings in the 28 days prior to that. By my calculation, that's 67 shootings in the 49 days from mid-October to Dec. 1.

* I didn't attend the news conference. I wish I'd been there. But I did some math after hearing of the Chief's news. Sixty-seven shootings in 49 days is an average of 1.37 shootings per day. Just in Fresno. That seems like a lot of gunfire on a daily basis. If that were to occur for an entire year, Fresno would be home to 500 shootings annually. Is Fresno turning into something like a failed Middle East state? Or is a municipal gunfire profile of 500 annual shootings simply the norm for Fresno or any city of a half-million people?

* What's going on? From what I've read, Dyer put all the blame on drugs, prostitution and gangs. We've been fighting drugs, prostitution and gangs for decades. The feds, the state, the county, the city, the nonprofits, the schools, the churches, the media. Together, they spend billions every year just in Fresno to eliminate these woes. Yet, they're only getting worse?

* Near as I can tell, the current government sentiment is that just about everyone who takes drugs, frequents prostitutes, works in the sex trade and loves to gang-bang is engaged in exercising their libertarian rights or are themselves a victim of an unjust society and in need of compassion and "services."

* So, I thought to myself: "I've heard the Chief before. Nothing's going to change."

* Then I asked Doug: "What's the real reason for Dyer's news conference?" I mean, it must have been quite a show -- the chief of police in that huge auditorium, delivering a Patton-like speech to inspire the troops, 125 or so officers sitting there and taking it all in, the TV cameras capturing it all for that night's newscasts. Did Ed Winchester do anything like that in the mid-1990s when Fresno had close to 100 homicides a year? I can't remember, but I don't think so. Dyer was on the force at that time. Is the Fresno of 2014 sinking into the chaos we suffered through 20 years ago?

* While all that stuff was bouncing around in my head today, two other City Hall items forced themselves into the mix.

* City Hall issued a news release trumpeting a story in The Wall Street Journal. The story said a study found Fresno to be among the top 10 housing markets to watch in 2015. Fresno found itself in the company of New York City, Boston, Seattle, Dallas and San Diego. Mayor Ashley Swearengin said: "Experts and opinion leaders around the country are taking note of the steady stream of encouraging economic news coming from Fresno. This is just another indication that our focus on improving Fresno's economy is also having a profound and positive effect on our national

reputation."

* While I was chewing on that bit of news, I went to City Hall's website to see what I could find on the 2035 general plan update. I found a lot.

* The City Council on Thursday, Dec. 4, at 10:15 a.m. is scheduled to hold a workshop on this plan. The plan with all its supporting policies (such as a reformed development code) is six years in the making. I spoke to a council member today. He pegged the total cost of the plan at \$5 million. I'm guessing that's on the low side.

* The mayor and some of her team members will conduct the workshop. It should be quite an event. I've heard the administration would like to get the plan in the council's hands this month -- January at the latest. Some community organizers with an interest in the plan want more time to review it.

* The city's website includes links to every piece of the plan. One of the links is to an eight-page report by planning director Jennifer Clark for the Fresno Planning Commission. The commission will debate the plan on Monday.

* Clark's report (one page of recommendations, seven pages of executive summary) lists the new plan's three guiding principles. These principles, Clark said, are woven throughout the long document.

* Principle No. 1: "PROTECT -- The new General Plan protects existing and future investments in homes, property, and businesses."

* Principle No. 2: "PRESERVE -- The new General Plan preserves the character and values that make Fresno a unique and desirable place."

* Principle No. 3: "PROMOTE -- The new General Plan promotes and incentivizes new investments by existing businesses and by new businesses seeking to relocate or expand."

* Clark's report concludes with the 2035 general plan's key point: Growth on the city's edges (sprawl, in the view of some) is a money-loser for Fresno. Inner-city development is a money-maker for Fresno.

* All of which brings back memories of the two City Council meetings in April 2012 when a theme for the 2035 general plan was adopted. A huge audience and the council members themselves made it clear that they expected the 2035 general plan to turn inner-city Fresno into a place of prosperity, peace and social justice. This would happen because inner-city Fresno, not suburbia, would be where Fresnoans will want to live. Higher-density housing in the inner-city -- Infill Development -- is what Fresnoans want. The Fresnoans living in these higher-density quarters will have kind hearts and gentle souls that remake the inner-city.

* Sounds great to me.

* Finally, I circled back to Chief Dyer's news conference, the 67 shootings in 49 days, the sense of crisis that apparently ran through the entire event. Where were all these shootings? In suburbia? In inner-city Fresno? Split evenly between the two spheres? I wasn't at the news conference, so I didn't get to ask Dyer. But he did say that four of the shootings occurred last week in or near Fink-White Playground. Fink-White is in southwest Fresno, just a five-minute walk from The Bee newsroom. In other words, inner-city Fresno. In other words, precisely the kind of challenged neighborhood that must be transformed by the 2035 general plan update if the general plan is to ever be deemed a success.

* So, I'm confused. Fresno is on the cusp of what city officials for years have said would be a historic day -- the passage of the 2035 general plan update. Fresno's past, its love of suburbia, will be put to rest. A new dawn is here. People of every kind and belief will come together and spontaneously develop a permanent and honorable civic consensus through the magic of high-density living in the inner-city. At the same time this promise is being made to planning commissioners, to City Council members and to average Fresnoans, police Chief Jerry Dyer is taking the stage in the shadow of Fresno's military museum to assure Fresnoans that his men and women in blue are redoubling

their efforts to halt the onslaught of gunfire engulfing Fresno neighborhoods.

* 67 shootings in 49 days. That equals 500 shootings in a year. That equals more than four shootings per year per square mile of Fresno. Just imagine four shootings in the past 12 months of the square mile of your neighborhood.

* What should Fresnans believe? The alarm of Jerry Dyer? Or the optimism of Jennifer Clark?

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