

## Mayor and Governor meet after HSR ceremony



# THE CITY BEAT

GEORGE  
HOSTETTER

Posted by George Hostetter on January 6, 2015

Tuesday's high-speed rail ceremony in downtown Fresno was most impressive. I guarantee local political and City Hall reporters will refer to it for the rest of the century.

"Burn the ships!" Spanish explorer Cortes supposedly ordered when he began his conquest of the Aztec Empire. State and federal officials did as much at Tulare and G streets on Jan. 6, 2015. The bullet train comes to California as promised or political reputations perish.

Mayor Ashley Swearengin gave the words of welcome. Gov. Jerry Brown, the keynote speaker, headed with staff and big-wigs to nearby Chukchansi Park after the event. Swearengin went, too. She got the Governor to one side for a brief chat.

The sole item on Swearengin's agenda: Encourage Brown to consider state help in developing "the ability to finance projects in inner-city Fresno," she said.

Here we'll pause for a quick review of key (and familiar) connections: High concentrations of poverty in Fresno -- Swearengin, Brown, Obama want change -- City Hall avoids bankruptcy -- City Hall finally says OK to Bus Rapid Transit -- City Hall finally says OK to new General Plan -- City Hall finally says OK to upgraded water system (not yet a done deal, though) -- City Hall finally on verge of finishing a reformed Development Code -- City Hall would love the bullet train to be as revolutionary as its supporters predict.

What's all this mean? Swearengin sees one missing piece. This piece would set in motion a rebirth of inner-city Fresno's economic, intellectual and social life. That missing piece is private-sector investment of an immense and consistent kind.

"I so desperately want blighted neighborhoods to come back again," Swearengin told me by phone Tuesday evening. "I know the dramatic impact that will have on families, kids, businesses large and small."

What kind of state help does Fresno need from Sacramento? Swearengin said it's too early to guess. The basic assumption is this: Private investment in many struggling neighborhoods currently doesn't pencil out; public-sector incentives can help (take a look at Uptown for proof); the Redevelopment Agency is dead; it's to the advantage of Brown and Swearengin to find alternatives to RDA.

Stay tuned.

I asked the Mayor one last question.

I started by recalling Alan Autry when he was mayor from 2001 to 2009. Autry wanted what Swearengin wants. And, like Swearengin, Autry was careful with his words.

But, I told the Mayor, I remember Autry making occasional use of the City Hall bully pulpit. It wasn't all public policy all the time with Autry. I remember him being something of a preacher. I remember him pushing civic virtue in addition to proper zoning codes as important to municipal rebirth.

Autry was the first to admit he was far from perfect. He was upfront during his 2000 mayoral campaign about his personal demons. He changed, Autry said, so there's hope for others.

Then I reviewed for Swearingin some of the current national statistics on marriage and children. I won't review them here. It's sufficient to note that children for the most part do immensely better if raised in stable two-parent families.

I asked the Mayor: Why don't you on occasion use your bully pulpit the way Autry did? I said she's all policy wonk all the time.

I told the Mayor that I understand liberty. I understand egalitarianism. I understand moral relativism. I deplore tyranny. Nobody's perfect, especially me. I get it.

But, I told the Mayor, it just seems odd to an old enlisted man like me that the smartest government experts from Washington, D.C. to Sacramento to Fresno figure the only "nudges" necessary to turn a tragic corner (pick any cross streets) in our city into a dynamic neighborhood full old-fashioned values like hard work, fidelity, perseverance, duty, delayed gratification and kindness is simply figuring out the right zoning code (R-3 or R-3-ab?) and making sure the private investor with a duplex project can get a 1% loan for for 50 years rather than 45.

Tocqueville said a democracy lives or dies on "the habits of the heart" in its citizens. I told the Mayor I don't understand why such a sentiment is a non-issue in the highest and most powerful circles of public policy.

"That's really not our business," the Mayor said.

What is City Hall's business, Swearingin said, is whether municipal red tape and regulatory foolishness are creating a barrier to private-sector investment.

I told the Mayor: You're right.

I thought of three things after our talk.

No City Hall beats the market. A bad street corner in Fresno with perfect zoning codes? It'll attract the crowd it deserves.

I thought of the city of Clovis. City officials there are planning for big growth in the northwest corner of their sphere of influence. We're talking about the Clovis North High School area. Perhaps 40,000 people will live there at full build-out many years from now. Clovis officials want young men and women and young families to live there.

And I thought of the thousands of gang-bangers in Fresno. They've been warned. A new Development Code is gonna get 'em.

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