

Fresno County DA Smittcamp will take active role in solving problems

By Pablo Lopez



Fresno County District Attorney Lisa Smittcamp talks about issues affecting the community at the Fresno Chamber of Commerce event called “Eggs and Issues” at the Piccadilly Inn in northwest Fresno on Friday.

PABLO LOPEZ — The Fresno Bee

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Move over, Police Chief Jerry Dyer. Step aside, Sheriff Margaret Mims.

There’s a new crimefighter in town named Lisa Smittcamp, and she promised Friday that she won’t be sitting on the sidelines while gangs, drugs and violent crimes ruin Fresno County communities.

“We have to stop this insanity,” the newly elected Fresno County district attorney told a gathering of 120 people who gathered at the Piccadilly Inn in northwest Fresno for the Fresno Chamber of Commerce’s morning event called “Eggs and Issues.”

In her first major public speech since taking office in January, Smittcamp said she and her crew of prosecutors and support staff have gone — and will continue to go — to schools, churches and any group, whether “it’s five or 500 people,” to talk about crime prevention and investing in children.



She also struck a nerve when she said:

- Heroin has become the drug of choice for many high school students across Fresno County.
- The death penalty is not effective. “We don’t execute anybody,” she said, while blaming “liberal judges and liberal government for letting killers out” of prison.
- The public was “bamboozled” by Proposition 47, which was approved by voters in November and reclassified some property and drug crimes from felonies to misdemeanors. Smittcamp said the criminals getting their sentences reduced are “breaking into cars, stealing your mail and burglarizing homes and businesses.”
- Legalizing marijuana is a bad idea. “It will make problems worse,” Smittcamp said, noting that in Colorado where marijuana has been legalized, driving under the influence has “gone through the roof.”

Smittcamp, 45, took over the District Attorney’s Office after defeating incumbent Elizabeth Egan, who first won the post in 2002 and was unopposed in two re-election bids. The heated race was one of the costliest elections in Fresno County history, with more than \$1.4 million raised and spent.

In the election, Dyer and the Fresno County prosecutors’ union supported Smittcamp; Mims supported Egan.

Friday, Smittcamp didn’t mention Egan by name, but she said she accomplished her first goal of improving morale in the office. “I can report that the DA’s office is sparkling again.” Prosecutors are working long hours and enjoying it, she said.

Smittcamp’s presence brought together Fresno’s movers and shakers, including Paul Caprioglio and Steve Brandau of the Fresno City Council, Mims, Fresno County Supervisor Buddy Mendes and Madera County Supervisor David Rogers.

She began by telling the crowd that she was born in Fresno and attended Gibson Elementary, Tenaya Middle and San Joaquin Memorial. She’s a graduate of the University of Southern California and the San Joaquin College of Law in Clovis. “I love this community,” she said.

Smittcamp started her legal career in 1996 at one of Fresno’s premier law firms — McCormick, Barstow, Sheppard, Wayte & Carruth. She joined the Fresno County District Attorney’s Office in 2001 after four years in the major crimes unit with the Madera County District Attorney’s Office.

As a trial lawyer, she prosecuted killers, rapists, child molesters and domestic-violence defendants.

Smittcamp drew laughs when she said her inspiration for becoming a prosecutor came from watching “Perry Mason,” a television series about a fictional criminal defense lawyer: “I thought Perry Mason was a bad ass. I thought he was cool and I wanted to be like him.”

She set a somber tone when she said kids are getting hooked on drugs — both street and prescription — and the gangs are making a killing selling drugs to them. “It’s a business to them,” Smittcamp said of the gangs. “They’re business people and they want to make money.”

Smittcamp said her office has about 275 employees, of whom 100 are prosecutors. The office reviews about 13,700 felony cases a year and files 7,000 of them. In addition, about 20,000 misdemeanor cases are filed each year, she said. Her budget is about \$40 million. Half of the money comes from grants to prosecute drunken driving, identity theft, welfare fraud and other crimes.

In the past, Smittcamp said, the District Attorney’s Office and local law enforcement agencies had an uneasy relationship because police officers and deputies would often have to wait outside a courtroom for several hours before an untrained prosecutor would tell them that the case was delayed. “That’s not going to happen any more,”

she promised. “If it does, I want to know about it.”

For the most part, Smittcamp said, she is happy to oversee a group of prosecutors who are dedicated public servants and care about the community.

She also told the gathering that many people in the community are making a difference. She gave a shout-out to former First 5 Fresno County executive director Kendra Rogers, who now works for Fresno developer Darius Assemi. His company, Granville Homes, recently donated \$100,000 to the “Talking is Teaching: Talk Read Sing” campaign, which encourages parents and caregivers to boost brain development and early language skills in children from birth to age 5.

Smittcamp also recognized Fresno Unified school trustee Brooke Ashjian, who is urging the school district to build a career technical high school that will teach children a trade like plumbing, road building, carpentry or welding. Smittcamp, whose father was a plumber, said Ashjian has invited her to be on the advisory board.

“The only way we are going to solve our problems is to invest in our kids,” she said.

In closing, Smittcamp said she wanted to dispel a myth. She said it doesn’t take a village to help a child find his or her way; it only takes one person. In her case, she said, it was Perry Mason.

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