

Who's the next Fresno mayor? Race to succeed Swearingin starts now

By John
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Who will follow Ashley Swearingin as Fresno mayor? These people are, at least, in the conversation. Top row, from left, Larry Powell, Jerry Dyer, Susan Anderson. Middle row, from left, Doug Vagim, Oliver Baines, Henry R. Perea. Bottom row, from left, Lee Brand, H. Spees, Jim Patterson.

FRESNO BEE FILES

- *Who will step forward next year to run for Fresno mayor?*
- *Those who want the job need to start their campaign now.*

• *Fresno Council Member Lee Brand has been the most visible candidate so far.*

Who wants to be Fresno's next mayor?

For those thinking about leading the state's fifth-largest city after Mayor Ashley Swearengin reaches her term limit next year, it's a question that should already be answered. The primary election is a little more than 13 months away, and a run this big requires a lot of advance planning.

"They should be working it already," said Fresno State political science professor Jeff Cummins. "You've got to start lining up donors and putting out feelers for support."

As of now, however, only two people appear to be actively campaigning, while two other formidable potential candidates are being coy about runs. Five others remain possibilities, though most are tepid in their public commitments. And, as always, an unknown dark horse could emerge at any time.

Right now, the most obvious candidate is Lee Brand. The Fresno City Council member has made no secret that he's running next year. He's the only person who has formed a campaign fundraising committee, and it already holds around \$150,000. Brand has also amassed more than 100 endorsements, including prominent old-guard political donors such as George Andros, Jerry Cook, Richard Gunner and Richard Spencer.

For those reasons, Brand has been tagged with frontrunner status — even as some who like him wonder openly if someone more charismatic is out there.

Also apparently on the campaign trail is H. Spees, a longtime Fresno pastor and community activist who started a mayoral run in 2004, only to cut it short after then-Mayor Alan Autry decided to seek a second term. Autry at the time had initially encouraged Spees to run and supported him.

Spees, who largely has been out of Fresno's political scene since then, is lunching with community leaders and meeting with groups and organizations. His core constituency comes from the city's evangelical community. Spees is currently senior vice president of Network Growth and Development for Leadership Foundations, which is a group of faith-based nonprofits working toward the social and spiritual transformation of cities in the United States, Africa and Asia. He also is honorary pastor-at-large at First Presbyterian Church in Fresno.

Still, he had said nothing officially about a run.

"I will be making a public announcement about running for mayor in the next few weeks," Spees said.

If it were this cut-and-dried, the race would be decided in the June 2016 primary election. If a candidate wins more than 50% of the vote, the race is over. If nobody reaches that threshold, the top two primary finishers advance to the November general election.

For this reason, many of the city's business and political leaders are wondering if Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea or Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer will enter the race.

Perea declined to comment on the possibility, though he has certainly explored a run and got a vote of support from his son, Assembly Member Henry T. Perea.

Dyer, for his part, was noncommittal.

"I have been extremely focused on leading the police department and have not given much thought to the mayor's race as of late," he said.

If he did decide to run, he would need to move from unincorporated Fresno County to Fresno.

Without a doubt, Dyer is the biggest wild card. Well-known and popular as the very visible face of the Fresno Police Department, local political watchers without question say he would be the new frontrunner if he entered the race. Until recently, many felt he would likely be unbeatable.

That was before police Deputy Chief Keith Foster, the department's No. 2 man, was arrested on federal drug charges. If Dyer runs, a question that only time could answer is whether voters would hold him accountable for Foster's alleged actions, see it as part of a larger problem in the department, or conclude that the Foster incident was isolated and that overall Dyer has done a good job of running the force.

Cummins applies the classic Watergate criteria — what did (Dyer) know and when did he know it?

"I would say it's hard to separate the two, given they are so close," Cummins said of Dyer and Foster. "(Dyer) had to have some idea that Foster was living an extravagant lifestyle and wondering what was going on."

Dyer, however, has said he didn't know what Foster was doing, and City Manager Bruce Rudd said there was no way Dyer, who has been chief since August 2001, could have known.

Cummins said other politicians have weathered worse scandals.

"It's not to say it completely eliminates his chances," Cummins said. "But it creates more questions than it would otherwise."

Perea would also draw votes. He's an elected official, as is his son. As such, the Perea name is known. Perea is also the only Democrat among the top mayoral possibilities, and while the race is officially nonpartisan, political affiliation always plays a role. Democrats outnumber Republicans by 25,000 registered voters in the city, though the perennial challenge remains for local Democrats — how to get registered voters to actually cast ballots.

Next year could also be the best-possible year for turnout, which could help Perea. It is not only a presidential election year, which always produces the highest turnout, but the office will be open because President Barack Obama can't seek re-election.

It'll also be easier to qualify ballot initiatives next year, so voters may be asked to weigh in on a wide array of issues.

The Fresno adage is that voters north of Shaw Avenue elect the city's mayors, but several local political watchers think the time is coming when the city's southern half will start making a difference. It's unknown if 2016 will be that year, but if it was, it would likely benefit Perea, whose supervisorial district covers a lot of southern Fresno, while his son's Assembly district does the same.

Perea's plans, however, remain publicly unknown, reduced to nothing but tantalizing hints.

Beyond the four are other prominent names who aren't dismissing the idea of a mayoral run, but who also are putting forth caveats. They are:

- Larry Powell. "If certain things happen where an opening came, I would step up in a flash and run," said the former Fresno County schools superintendent. "As long as the right candidates are in the race, I don't feel like I need to run. You never know what happens, so I don't want to say I'm not running." Powell didn't say who the right candidates are, but one is almost certainly Spees, if he enters the race.

- Susan Anderson. "It's a very remote possibility," the former Fresno County supervisor said. "A lot of people have been recruiting me. I've been listening and talking to people."

- Jim Patterson. The city will elect its fourth strong mayor next year. Patterson was the first, leaving office at the end of 2000. When asked about a 2016 run, Patterson initially dismissed the possibility, but then a short time later in the same discussion left the door slightly open. He's in his second Assembly term. It's a job he said he enjoys and one

where he feels he can make real change for the region. To run for mayor, he'd have to give up his Assembly seat.

- Oliver Baines. In his second Fresno City Council term, Baines has endorsed Brand, and he said this week that he has no plans to run for mayor — for now. But he refused to absolutely rule out a candidacy, saying it is too early to definitively decide.
- Doug Vagim. The former Fresno County supervisor, best known recently for battling the city over privatizing residential trash pickup and raising water rates, said he knows the community and could do the job. He said he might run, but for now thinks he can be most effective by keeping a close eye on how the city uses the water-rate increase money to implement its planned infrastructure upgrades.

Some of those being mentioned as mayoral candidates are nixing the idea, saying they don't plan to run — period.

Henry T. Perea is one of them. Perea lost to Swearingin in the 2008 mayor's race, but his name popped up because he has close to \$1 million sitting in his Assembly campaign account, and he could likely use much or all of it for a mayoral run.

Another is Fresno Unified Trustee Brooke Ashjian, who said he's been encouraged to run. But Ashjian lives in a county island and has no plans to move.

There was some buzz a few months ago about Fresno City Council Member Clint Olivier running, but he said he supports Brand and is moving toward a run for the 31st Assembly District seat, where Perea will reach his term limit next year.

Others ruling out runs are Bitwise CEO Jake Soberal — at least for next year — and Fresno Police Officers Association President Jacky Parks.

So, for the moment, Brand remains the early favorite to succeed Swearingin.

He fits the criteria set by many in the business community, who say it is critical that the next mayor have CEO experience. Brand is a self-made millionaire who has been a real-estate investor, started businesses and eventually founded a property-management company called Westco.

"We're handing a billion dollars over to a strong mayor," said Michael Der Manouel Jr., a Brand supporter who is a Fresno businessman and chairman of the GOP-oriented Lincoln Club of Fresno County. "(Brand's) a CEO in private business and has been an incredibly productive council member with real achievements, not just rhetoric."

For now, Brand said he plans to "continue doing what I'm doing on the council." He has a few more policy reforms in the works, and will speak whenever he is invited — which as a sitting council member is quite often.

As he does, he scoffs at the lack of charisma knock.

So does Der Manouel: "There's a thousand ways to run a charismatic campaign."

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