

Fresno's proposed budget calls for more cops and fire service

By George Hostetter



Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

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- *Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin unveils her proposed \$1.2 billion budget for 2015-16.*
- *She wants to hire more police officers and add a fire truck company to Station 9.*
- *The budget must be approved by the City Council. Budget hearings begin in June.*



More cops, another fire truck company, better parks and a growing reserve highlight [Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin's new budget](#).



Hard to believe this is the same Fresno that was careening toward bankruptcy just two years ago.

Swearingin and City Manager Bruce Rudd on Monday unveiled a Fiscal Year 2016 budget of \$1.2 billion overall and

\$288.5 million in the general fund.

The city's top two executives were joined at an afternoon news conference by the platoon of in-house experts that crunched the numbers. The restoration of services is this budget's prevailing theme.

"I can't fully express how proud I am of the way in which our team and our residents have responded to the financial challenges our city has faced over the past five years," Swearingin said.

Rudd said Fresno not long ago was often mentioned in the same breath with financial failures such as Detroit and Stockton. He said Fresno will pursue a boost of services in a steady and deliberate manner.

"More importantly, we have adopted policies and practices that will ensure we are prepared for the next economic downturn," Rudd said.

Council Member Sal Quintero said he appreciates the budget's emphasis on fundamentals, such as public safety, parks and infrastructure repairs.

"I've always said it's the basics that mean so much to people, especially in older neighborhoods," said Quintero, who represents southeast Fresno. The budget "is a great start."

The Great Recession hammered Fresno. The Police Department saw its roster of sworn officers drop by about 150. The Fire Department struggled with bare-bones staffing and aging equipment. The Parks Department pleaded with community groups to help maintain the green space. The general fund reserve, that pot of rainy-day money designed to keep chaos at bay, all but disappeared.

On and on it went like that.

The budget for this fiscal year (ending June 30) reflected the improving national economy. Status quo, not doom, was its theme.

The 2016 budget builds on an anticipated uptick in revenues (taxes, for the most part) and continued prudence on expenses.

Key proposals include:

- The addition of 43 police officers, giving Fresno 760 cops by June 2016.
- The addition of a truck company to Fire Station 9 (Clinton and Fruit avenues), giving Fresno its second two-company station.
- A commitment to completely replace the Fire Department's fleet in the next eight years, as well as replace 50 police cars and 14 motorcycles.
- A commitment of \$5 million for repairs and renovations at parks facilities.
- Funding for 3.1 miles of new trails.
- An additional \$2.13 million for street repairs.
- Funding for video storage needed for the Police Department's body-camera program.
- Money for ongoing revitalization efforts of historic neighborhoods throughout inner-city Fresno.
- A boost to the general fund reserve of more than \$6 million to the \$15 million range.

Swearingin's budget is merely a proposal at this point. The next stop is the City Council. Budget hearings begin in

June, and interesting amendments can come from the dais.

For example, Swearingin said the new budget includes \$50,000 for each council member's infrastructure budget. This is money for things like pothole repairs as directed by the council member. Council members love their infrastructure budgets, and have been known to try to increase them. Swearingin said she doesn't expect that to happen in June.

Council members in the past have also been quick to insert stipends for their favorite nonprofits, saying it's all for the public good. Swearingin said she's not counting on such a battle next month.

Proposed City Hall budgets with page after page of numbers are always too much to digest in one sitting. This new one, at 321 pages, is no different. It's hard for the people to grasp exactly what all these figures mean.

Swearingin on Monday helped Fresno see.

Only two years ago, she said, financial experts said there was a good chance Fresno would go belly-up.

Then the city of Fresno — its 3,200-plus municipal employees, its 500,000-plus residents — went to work on fixing the numbers, she said.

The newfound stability that such numbers represent points to a 2015-16 fiscal year with legitimate cause for optimism, she said.

It should be a year of ribbon-cuttings (Fulton Corridor project and the Cultural Arts District park). It should be a year of expansion (watch for more muscle in code enforcement). It should be a year for public transportation (Bus Rapid Transit and beefed up security for Fresno Area Express).

Take care of those dry budget numbers, Swearingin said, and civic life brightens.

"This budget is proof positive that we have changed the culture at City Hall to the point where everyone is firmly committed to creating lasting solutions," Swearingin said.

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