

\$5.8 million for Fresno's parks in city budget plan

By George
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Fresno Council Member Paul Caprioglio, center, speaks during a press conference at Vinland Park on proposals included in the 2016 city budget, significantly increasing investment in Fresno parks including Vinland.

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- *Better bathrooms, resurfaced sports courts are coming to Fresno parks*
- *City working on two new parks*
- *City officials say Fresno has new commitment to greenspace*

Fresno's parks and community centers are among the winners in Mayor Ashley Swearingin's proposed fiscal year 2016 budget.

The spending plan includes the construction of two new parks and nearly \$6 million for upgrades to parks in older neighborhoods.

"We are running ourselves ragged to make sure the people know the good news" in the \$1.2 billion budget, Swearingin said Monday morning.

The mayor and top city officials gathered at Vinland Neighborhood Park near Fresno State to explain what the budget

means for Fresnoans who love their greenspace.

Most tellingly, they said, the budget includes \$5.8 million for things like renovated bathrooms, repaved sports courts, resurfaced gym floors and new splash courts.

Maintenance chores, long deferred in the recent era of tight budgets, are getting their due.

Vinland, Swearingin said, “is a great example of the type of asset we want to improve, renovate and rehabilitate in this year’s budget.”

The mayor was joined by Council Member Paul Caprioglio (whose District 4 includes Vinland), Council President Oliver Baines, Council Member Sal Quintero, City Manager Bruce Rudd and Parks Director Manuel Mollinedo.

Caprioglio said he is not fond of words that aren’t backed by action.

“We’re going to restore the parks and we’re going to restore the older areas of Fresno,” Caprioglio said.

Baines noted that city officials last week gathered at City Hall to review the budget’s commitment to better police and fire protection.

Better parks, Baines said, are also “an investment in the public safety of our community.”

Quintero said City Hall insiders sometimes give nicknames to budgets. He said there has been the budget from the netherworld and the Band-Aid budget.

“This is the restoration budget,” Quintero said, adding with a smile that he is ready to make a motion approving the parks spending plan even though budget hearings are next month.

Rudd, who more than anyone at City Hall has emphasized the importance of asset maintenance, said the city “turned the corner” with the new budget.

The Parks Department’s progress is measured in several ways.

Perhaps most noticeable is the air of confidence at City Hall. It wasn’t too long ago that Swearingin was reduced to asking nonprofits to help with parks maintenance. As Monday’s news conference made clear, city leaders now can hardly wait to get in front of greenspace issues.

Parks for several years couldn’t afford to hire a full-time director. Rudd — first as assistant city manager, then as city manager — doubled as head of parks. That changed last June when Mollinedo, former director of the Honolulu zoo, came on board.

New parks were on the drawing board even at the worst of the Great Recession. But there they stayed since no one could find the money to keep them maintained. The economy rebounded, city officials reviewed their priorities, and pretty soon construction began on Martin Ray Reilly Park in southeast Fresno. It opened officially this year.

Swearingin’s 2016 budget aims to keep the momentum going. Among the budget’s highlights:

- Construction continues on the Universally Accessible Park (also called Inspiration Park) west of Highway 99.
- Construction will begin on the Cultural Arts District Park, adding greenspace to what is one of the most dynamic neighborhoods in downtown.
- Rehabilitated bathrooms and sports courts at Vinland, plus a new splash park.
- Nearly \$1 million of improvements for Holmes Park, including new gym floors, renovated restrooms, a new splash

park and improved lighting.

- Improvements at the Cary and Frank H. Ball parks, the Mosqueda Center and the California/Elm gym.
- Construction of more than three miles of new trails, including two grant-funded projects to build the first segment of the Bankside Trail on Shields Avenue between First and Fresno streets.

A project dear to city officials is an improved irrigation system throughout the parks system. Officials worry another year or two of drought will devastate the city-owned urban forest. However, the status of this project is unclear.

Still, city officials on Monday saw no reason to hide their optimism for Fresno's parks. Swearingin didn't blink when a reporter asked if City Hall was overconfident, and might return to the old days of big borrowing to advance a feel-good agenda, something that added to Fresno's woes in the recession.

City Hall will be a prudent as well as enthusiastic advocate for parks, Swearingin said.

Mollinedo said his parks team is ready to get to work.

"This coming year is going to be very busy," he said.

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