

Community members on Fresno’s park budget: It’s not enough

By Rory Appleton and George Hostetter



Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, second from left, with City Manager Bruce Rudd, PARCS Director Manuel Mollinedo and Council Members Oliver Baines III, far left, Paul Caprioglio and Sal Quintero prepare for a news conference at Vinland Park on Gettysburg Avenue Monday morning to highlight proposals included in the FY2015-16 city budget significantly increasing investment in Fresno parks, including Vinland. Photographed Monday, May 11, 215 in Fresno, Calif. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

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- *About 70 people voice concerns over park space and soccer fields in Fresno*
- *The city’s proposed budget allocates about \$6 million for parks and recreation*
- *Next step: speak up at June 4 City Council meeting*



Concerned community members, local nonprofit leaders and a group of young kids wearing bright pink soccer uniforms filled folding chairs set up inside Grace United Methodist Church in southeast Fresno on Tuesday night to raise a call to action for more parks and greenspace.



The crowd of around 70 acted as a sounding board for one another, with each attendee pledging more support than the last for demands that they say will be voiced at the June 4 City Council meeting.

“Our cities are held down by a lack of parks,” Grace United Rev. Juan Saavedra said.

“We are essentially telling kids that it might be better for them to go to jail than play,” he added in reference to the city’s proposed 2015-16 budget, which calls for, among other things, increased law enforcement spending.

Jose Leon-Barraza, president of Southeast Fresno Community Economic Development Association, joined Saavedra in doing most of the talking. Leaders from local soccer leagues, Fresno Building Healthy Communities and the Fresno Fuego soccer team also addressed the crowd. A representative from District 1 Council Member Esmeralda Soria’s office attended but did not speak.

Those directly affected by a lack of greenspace also made their voices heard.

“I want to see more parks because some of our teams have to cancel games (for lack of space),” said Teresa Quintero, 11, who donned a big pink bow to match her soccer jersey. “We play out of town at better parks. More parks aren’t too much to ask for.”

All asked for two things from the city: A commitment to build more — not just maintaining current — soccer fields and parks, and sustained financial backing to see it through.

At a news conference Monday, Mayor Ashley Swearengin touted a proposed 2015-16 city budget that includes nearly \$6 million, or about 0.5%, for park upgrades. City officials estimate that about \$1 million will be spent in the southeast area.

Proposed upgrades for this area include:

- The investment of nearly \$250,000 for phase 2 construction at Martin Ray Reilly Park.
- Creation of a community garden at Romain Playground.
- Replacement of the tot lot at Sunnyside Park.
- Remodeled auditorium, rehabilitated restrooms, construction of a walking path and installation of drought-resistant turf at Mosqueda Community Center.
- Renovated soccer field, new goals/bleachers, new drinking fountain and concrete repairs at Pilibos Park.

It’s no secret that southeast Fresno doesn’t have enough greenspace.

Most sections of Fresno are short of parks, which explains why the city almost always ranks toward the bottom of national surveys on municipal greenspace. The reasons for this often send the debate into heated discussion over past growth policies.

City Hall in then-Mayor Alan Autry’s second term thought it had found a solution — debt. The City Council on a 6-1 vote (Larry Westerlund voted no) decided to borrow more than \$30 million to super-charge the rehabilitation of aging parks and build new ones. The plan was to pay much of the annual bond bill with fees from residential construction.

Then the economy tanked, the new-home market dried up, parks fees all but disappeared and Swearengin, who succeeded Autry in January 2009, was soon struggling to keep Fresno out of bankruptcy court. All this was Westerlund’s fear in 2008.

The economy today has rebounded. City officials are preparing to rebuild the Parks Department.

For Leon-Barraza, this rebound calls for more parks and recreation spending than what was outlined Monday.

He called attention to the disparity between Fresno areas, saying that north Fresno residents have 4.62 acres of park land per 1,000 residents while south Fresno occupants only have 1.02 acres.

“The resources are not enough,” Leon-Barraza said. “Some of our (southeast Fresno) parks look like a third-world country.”

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