

EDITORIAL: Take a bow, Fresno, for outlasting tough times



Chris Aycock, youth pastor of First Baptist Church of Fresno chats with Alissa Navarro, 9, at Lafayette Park in 2010. Though the park was going to be closed due to budget cuts, the church worked out an arrangement with the city to staff the park's center with church volunteers like Aycock. Efforts such as these helped Fresno weather its municipal budget crisis.

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There is much to cheer in Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin's proposed \$1.2 billion 2016 fiscal year budget.

After years of belt-tightening, the city now can afford to strengthen the police department by restoring 43 officer positions and replacing 50 high-mileage patrol cars. In addition, four officers will support Fresno Area Express buses, chiefly at the Manchester bus station and along Blackstone Avenue.

The Fresno Fire Department will receive much-needed investment, too, with the addition of 13 firefighters plus a second truck company at busy Station 9, which is at Clinton and Vagedes avenues. With the new hires, the department's minimum staffing at any given hour will go from 70 to 73.

And the Fresno Parks Department, which took a major hit during the Great Recession, will open the Universally Accessible Park west of Highway 99, begin construction on a park in the Cultural Arts District, and allocate \$5.8 million into upgrades for parks in older neighborhoods.

This budget reflects Fresno's rebounding economy and the fact that Swearingin — in concert with the City Council and residents — has done an outstanding job of navigating the city through difficult financial times that, at one point,

included a threat of municipal bankruptcy.

Swearengin set a course and stuck to it. Positions were cut. Operating expenses were reduced. Debt was repaid. And the city is building its rainy day reserve fund for the next time the economy goes south.

By and large, council members have bought into Swearengin's budgets since she took office in 2009 — sometimes in the face of stiff opposition. The only major hiccup was the mayor's attempt to privatize residential garbage collection, which pitted neighbor against neighbor, and ultimately resulted in defeat for Swearengin.

Fresno residents have shown themselves to be resourceful, resilient and loyal. They have put up with slower police and fire response times and reductions in city services. And yet they have given of themselves more than ever by donating millions of volunteer hours maintaining parks, tutoring students and caring for senior citizens.

Swearengin has much on her plate for the final 18-plus months she's in office. There is the Fulton Mall project, the massive water-system upgrade and the roll-out of Bus Rapid Transit. She and her team also must pour the foundation for a bold and controversial 2035 General Plan that attempts to curb urban sprawl and rebuild Fresno's inner core.

Another item on her list is a 20-year parks master plan. It's no secret that Fresno needs more green space. We believe that Fresno Unified School District can play an instrumental role in alleviating the need for more recreational spaces by opening its school grounds to the public. Other cities and school districts work closely together on this, there's no reason why Fresno can't do it, too.

Finally, south Fresno has 1.02 acres per thousand residents of municipal park space compared to 4.62 acres per thousand in north Fresno. Looking ahead to the 2017 fiscal year budget, we'd like to see funding that gets the ball rolling on construction of a regional park for south Fresno residents.