

Fresno still on bottom of municipal parks ranking

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Fresno no longer ranks alone as the worst city in The Trust for Public Land's annual ranking of municipal park systems.

The Trust's latest survey again puts Fresno at the bottom of a long list, but this time in a tie with Charlotte, North Carolina. The two cities share No. 74.

Fresno's unenviable record: four straight years in last place.

A top Trust official said Fresnans should take heart that they have company.

"There has been progress," said The Trust's Peter Harnik.

The organization said Wednesday the recent opening of Martin Ray Reilly Park is cause for applause. The Trust said the percentage of Fresnans living within a 10-minute walk of a park (a key yardstick) is 54, three percentage points more than last year.

The median size of a Fresno park is five acres, same as the survey's average.

The Trust found Fresno spends \$39 per resident on parks, compared with the survey average of \$83. Less money leads inevitably to all sorts of shortcomings compared with most of the other cities.

Minnesota's Minneapolis and St. Paul are tied for No. 1.

Fresno's last-place ranking, softened not a whit by the pairing with Charlotte, comes as no surprise.

Fresno in 2012 was last among 40 cities. An official with The Trust (a San Francisco-based group advocating for safe, clean green space and the preservation of nature) said the inaugural survey "means every city can improve."

Fresno in 2013 was last among 50 cities. This time a trust official personalized the analysis, saying Fresno "has a lot of ground to catch up."

Fresno in 2014 was last among 60 cities. A Trust official said everyone at the nonprofit knows "Fresno is working hard to raise its score."

The survey now takes in 75 cities and, as usual, Fresno falls far behind the highest-ranking cities in just about every category. More parks, more basketball courts, more playgrounds, more recreation centers, more money — Fresno needs them all in abundant quantities to be ranked with America's greenest and most recreation-committed communities.

Fresno has tried. City Hall in recent years has beaten a path to Sacramento seeking green-space money.

The result has been millions in grant funding for construction of new parks.

City Hall not long ago asked residents of an area west of Highway 99 to voluntarily create a special taxing district for maintenance and operations of a proposed park in the neighborhood. The idea went to a public vote and was soundly rejected.

City Hall on occasion has entertained notions of a sales-tax hike to boost funding of vital services, parks among them.

Someone always takes a closer look at the local tax burden and raises a finger to test the political winds. The notions die.

Two points are worth making about The Trust's latest survey.

It comes a week after Mayor Ashley Swearingin and top city officials gathered at Vinland Neighborhood Park near Fresno State to review parks funding in the mayor's fiscal year 2016 budget. A city that two years ago was on the edge of bankruptcy expects to spend nearly \$6 million on green space/recreation center upgrades, the first step in a prudent, systematic effort to restore services.

Martin Ray Reilly Park in southeast Fresno had opened a few months earlier. The Universally Accessible Park (also called Inspiration Park) west of Highway 99 and the Cultural Arts Park on the north edge of downtown are expected to open within a year or so. The hurdle of parks maintenance, nearly insurmountable during the Great Recession, had finally been cleared.

Optimism reigned.

"This year's budget is an important shift in the direction of resources," said Swearingin, who is termed out in January 2017. "I am committed in my last months in office to making sure we have a long-term plan in place to achieve the parks standards that our community truly deserves. It happens when we all work together."

Council Member Paul Caprioglio, who represents the Vinland area, said the council is second to none among parks supporters.

"Actions speak louder than words," Caprioglio said. "The action today speaks volumes about where we're going to go with this budget."

The second point deals with the two cities at the bottom of The Trust's survey.

Fresno is no stranger to finding itself at the bottom of lifestyle studies designed by nonprofits and special-interest groups to influence policy-makers.

Fresno's challenges are well-documented: high unemployment, one-industry economy, fast-growing population, high concentrations of poverty, gangs, public-education woes, to name only a few.

The metropolitan areas up and down Highway 99 — Stockton, Modesto, Merced, Visalia-Tulare, Bakersfield — face similar challenges and often find themselves ranked with Fresno at the bottom of these lists.

And now, with this latest survey from The Trust for Public Land, Fresno looks to its side and finds Charlotte, North Carolina, spotlighted in equal fashion for allegedly failing to serve its people.

With nearly 800,000 people, Charlotte is that state's largest city. It is home to the Carolina Panthers of the National Football League, the Charlotte Hornets of the National Basketball Association and the NASCAR Hall of Fame. It is home to a campus of the University of North Carolina.

Its largest employers include Bank of America and Duke Energy. The Charlotte region bills itself as The New Energy Capital because of all the nearby energy-oriented companies.

The Trust's Harnik said "it takes a long time to turn around a parks system" that lags far behind those in cities with more blessings.

Harnik might have added that, as this unusual marriage of Fresno and Charlotte suggests, municipal parks policy is not a one-size-fits-all scenario.

Fresno City Manager Bruce Rudd on Wednesday said as much. Maintenance of existing assets, prudent expansion

of green space and fiscal stability remain the foundation of his parks policy, he said. He shows scant interest in outside pressures.

“If jumping a few positions in those rankings means I’m not going to make needed improvements in the parks we already have,” Rudd said, “then I’m not willing to make that compromise.”

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