

Fresno still on bottom of national ranking of city parks

The Fresno
Bee

Fresno no longer ranks as the worst city on The Trust for Public Land's annual ranking of cities and their park systems.

However, the 2015 ParkScore Index still puts Fresno at the bottom, this time in a tie with Charlotte, North Carolina.

The two cities share 74th place.

In a news release, the trust said Wednesday that the opening of Martin Ray Reilly Park in Fresno was a positive development this past year. The trust said 54% of Fresnans live within a 10-minute walk to a park, which is the organization's goal. That is an improvement of three percentage points from last year.

Fresno also has a median park size of five acres, which equals the national average.

But the city's parks budget is low compared to most cities, the trust found, and there is limited access to amenities.

The trust found Fresno spends \$39 per resident on parks, compared to the ParkScore average of \$83. Availability of basketball courts, playgrounds, recreation and senior centers in Fresno is also well below the index's average.

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 every category. More parks, more dog parks, more playgrounds, more recreation centers, more money — Fresno needs them all in abundant quantities to be ranked with America's greenest 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. Then someone 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) and the Cultural Arts Park are expected to open within a year or so. The hurdle of parks maintenance, nearly insurmountable during the Great Recession, had finally been cleared.

"This year's budget is an important shift in the direction of resources," Swearingin said. "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 on board.

"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 struggling to spread limited resources among many competing interests.

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. It's largest employers include Bank of America and Duke Energy. The metropolitan area bills itself as The New Energy Capital because of all the nearby energy-oriented companies.