

Swearingin touts Fresno success, agenda in State of the City speech

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Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin's annual State of the City address Wednesday was one that tallied the accomplishments of the past six years and laid out an agenda for the final 19 months.

It was a speech about her legacy, and the talking points will sound very familiar to anyone who has heard the leader of the state's fifth-largest city speak recently.

Everything is great in Fresno, Swearingin said, and she wasn't shy about claiming her role in the city's fortunes.

Looking back, she talked of shepherding Fresno through the dark economic times that came following the worst recession in more than 70 years, but said the city was now back from the brink and restoring lost services. Looking at the present, she ticked off a list of praises Fresno has earned of late. Looking ahead, she said the city has revamped its general plan and is now looking to the equally important development code. And addressing her most high-profile project, by the end of the year construction should start on remaking the Fulton Mall in downtown Fresno back into Fulton Street.

"The state of our city is stronger than ever," she said.

And, the mayor noted about a city that often questions its self-worth, "the nation is buzzing about what we've accomplished."

She noted a series in The Atlantic Magazine called "American Futures," which chronicled Fresno's comeback. She highlighted a January Brookings Institution report that ranked the 300 fastest-growing metropolitan economies in the world. It found Fresno was the fourth-best job-creating region in the world from 2013 to 2014, with a 4.5% growth rate compared to 1.9% nationally. She said the real estate website Trulia.com put Fresno among its top 10 housing markets to watch in 2015.

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Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin

She gave a nod to police Chief Jerry Dyer, noting a Washington Post story that highlighted the department's approach to community outreach in southwest Fresno as a way to avoid conflict.

She said that the new general plan will fight urban blight, and a new report shows homelessness is down.

She talked up a new mobile app — FresGO — to make it easier for city residents to do everything from giving City Hall feedback on things like potholes to tracking requests for service.

"For all of us who have been in the trenches, fighting for every inch of recovery and believe, truly, madly, deeply, that we're on the cusp of something epic happening right here in Fresno, let me state for the record, it's about damn time somebody noticed," she said of the accolades.

The emotional high point of the day, however, came long before Swearingin's speech. The mayor gave Stacey Gonzales, mother of slain 9-year-old Janessa Ramirez, a key to the city. Gonzales came to the stage during a

standing ovation, as Swearingin noted she had forgiven the shooters in the incident that took her daughter's life.

That's not to say that everything is perfect. In Swearingin's speech, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but outside the venue, Building Healthy Communities, which advocates for health initiatives in the city's lower-income areas, continued to press its case to put an ad on Fresno Area Express buses. The group says the ad highlights the discrepancy in park space between wealthier north Fresno and poorer south Fresno. The City Attorney's Office determined that the ad ran afoul of part of the municipal code that states "no political advertising matter or sign shall be displayed upon any bus or on transit property."

And Council Member Clint Olivier continued to joust with Swearingin — even as she lightheartedly pointed out in her speech that she defeated him in a recent bobblehead battle — over the mayor's push to remake Blackstone Avenue as a more pedestrian friendly boulevard that features buildings close to the street. Swearingin announced that Smart & Final would take over the soon-to-close Save Mart at Blackstone and Clinton avenues. But Olivier said on Twitter that was happening only because "it's impossible to build new on Blackstone Ave. The general plan is an epic failure.'

Smart & Final earlier gave up on a plan to build a new store from scratch on a different corner of the same intersection.

Swearingin, however, stuck to her praise for the city, and not only noted, but accepted The Atlantic Magazine's praise for her in its articles on Fresno. She said story author James Fallows "was right in assessing my role in the comeback of Fresno's downtown — the public champion for revitalization. When I'm finished serving as the mayor of Fresno, I want it to be said of me that I was willing to make any personal or political sacrifice, do whatever it took to turnaround our downtown and inner city."

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