

Fresno council enjoys spending extra millions from state

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The Fresno City Council at Tuesday's budget hearings happily disposed of unexpected millions.

Council Member Esmeralda Soria and her passion for parks again dominated things, even though she failed — in the short-term— to get more money for improving parks and boosting recreation programs

The council went through 17 budget motions, approving most with the encouragement of Mayor Ashley Swearengin. Three were defeated, including a grant to the Fresno Arts Council and a hike to council members' infrastructure budgets.

Swearengin's proposed \$1.2 billion fiscal year 2016 budget heads to the council on Friday for an up-or-down vote.

But Tuesday's meeting took an unusual turn when the council learned Fresno will soon get \$4.1 million from Sacramento. The state is always forcing costly policies on cities. The money is reimbursement for these mandated expenses.

Swearengin, for reasons tied to statewide stresses of the Great Recession, knew the money was out there, but far from a sure thing. So, she didn't include it in her new budget.

City Hall learned late Monday that the bonanza is coming.

This set in motion events that suggest Fresno sometimes can't stand prosperity.

The council ended Monday morning's hearing with 14 motions on the table. Such motions are routine in this annual process. The council with enough votes can tweak the budget to its liking.

The chore is finding the money — the proverbial robbing Peter to pay Paul — in a spending plan where every penny is vested with someone's political blood.

The 14 motions totaled more than \$3 million of additional spending. That pointed to war on Tuesday.

Then Hurricane Sacramento (former Mayor Alan Autry's nickname for the money-grabbing state) turned into Sugar Daddy Sacramento.

How to spend the money? Council members and the mayor hustled late Monday and early Tuesday to take control.

The back story is Soria and parks.

Community activists for weeks have used just about every means available in a democracy to boost parks funding. Some City Hall officials said those on occasion bordered on demagoguery. Ambition on both sides turned into hard feelings.

Soria last week moved to spend an additional \$1.5 million on parks. Money would go to a master plan, maintenance and programming. Council Member Paul Caprioglio provided the necessary second.

Swearengin for weeks said she's second to none in her love of parks. She said her budget has nearly \$6 million for improvements. That's enough for now, she said.

The first week of hearings pointed to an easy Swearengin victory. Soria struggled to find a funding source that didn't

annoy her council colleagues. Touching the general fund reserve, the only logical piggy bank, was the kiss of death.

Fresno went through much of the Great Recession with almost no reserve. The reserve this fiscal year (ending June 30) will have nearly \$9 million. Swearingin's 2016 budget calls for a \$15 million-plus reserve by next summer.

Then came \$4.1 million out of nowhere.

Soria on Tuesday revised her motion.

The amount would be reduced to \$1 million. No need to fund a master plan since a motion from Council Member Sal Quintero is taking care of that, she said.

Half of the \$1 million would go to improvements at run-down parks, Soria said.

The other half-million would go to programming, Soria said.

"I'm not taking money from the reserve," Soria said. "I'm not saying parks over streets. I'm saying do both because of the funds that came in unexpectedly."

Swearingin had different ideas. Her plan (pitched by City Manager Bruce Rudd) spends nearly \$2.3 million of the \$4.1 million on a variety of council motions. For example, \$1.4 million would be added to the streets program. The Police Department's records section would get three clerks. The Fresno Art Museum would get a new coat of paint.

Another \$825,000 would go into an account for public safety communications equipment.

That leaves \$1 million. Swearingin's idea: Put it in the reserve.

Soria's motion, at the suggestion of Council President Oliver Baines, went through a final adjustment. It made no difference. Soria's quest failed on a 3-4 vote. Quintero, Lee Brand, Steve Brandau and Clint Olivier voted no.

Swearingin's plan for the \$4.1 million carried in full. Three more motions were made, bringing the total to 17. The council's work was done before lunch.

"This is a really solid budget," Swearingin said. "I'm grateful to the council for its support."

Soria didn't leave empty-handed. No one on the council or in the administration wanted to walk away as an enemy of parks. Soria's opponents said they'll return to parks, perhaps in January. If there's extra money for maintenance and programming, they said, they might change their minds.

Soria said she'll hold them to their word.

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