

Ashley Swearingin: Adding to reserve fund is right decision

By Ashley Swearingin

There's a certain luxury to standing on the sidelines. It's the advantage of questioning the play calling without having to endure the endless hours of preparation and consternation that goes into each and every game plan.

When it comes to the issue of Fresno parks, the sidelines are getting crowded.

Fresno has finished in last place four straight years in The Trust for Public Land's annual ranking of municipal park systems. | ERIC PAUL ZAMORA
THE FRESNO BEE

Not only are activists shouting for "more parks now," but The Bee Editorial Board has jumped into the fray by criticizing my administration for using a balanced, reasonable fiscal strategy to manage a one-time windfall of \$4.1 million from the state — the same strategy that the board had previously complimented us for in our efforts to save the city from bankruptcy.

The editorial neglected to mention that part of that \$4.1 million goes to fund the Parks Master Plan that we all know is necessary to repairing our aging parks and begin building new ones.

The rest of the windfall was spread around between public safety, public works, and, yes, \$1 million for the general reserve. I'm astounded that anyone would complain about the city saving for a rainy day after living through the financial crisis of the past five years.

We responded to that crisis in a responsible manner. We reduced spending, paid off the debt, and started building our reserve fund. That reserve currently stands at \$5 million — which, by the way, doesn't even cover one General Fund payroll period.

If all goes well, we'll have \$16.5 million in reserve at the end of the next fiscal year. That's still half of what financial experts say is necessary for a budget our size. So we will have to keep saving here and there.

The editorial claimed that by choosing fiscal responsibility, I was ignoring "a glaring need." I assure you, every day at City Hall, my staff and I are faced with at least a dozen "glaring needs."

There are those who believe that Fresno has a glaring need for more police officers and firefighters. And they're right.

There are those who feel Fresno has a glaring need for more staffing and tools to fight blight and eliminate homelessness. And they're right, too.

And there are those who say Fresno has a glaring need for street repairs and civic improvements. In fact, KMJ and KMPH this past week posted an online poll asking: "In your opinion, which is more important — more Fresno parks or street/sidewalk repair?"

Ninety-six percent said streets and sidewalks.

I don't mind hearing from voices who share our concern for the community. I want more parks. Better and cleaner parks, too. That's why the FY2016 budget includes almost \$6 million for new parks and park renovation and why we'll look at adding additional funding for parks and street repair if our mid-year budget review shows that the money is there.



That's also why the city of Fresno has been in discussions with Fresno Unified to open its playground space and provide greater recreational opportunity for our children, especially in central and south Fresno.

It's a basic tenet of human nature that you'll be less careful spending other people's money than you would with your own. I have consistently avoided that temptation during my six and a half years as mayor while, at least in this instance, the Bee seems to embrace it.

Let's instead embrace the advice of Warren Buffet: "Do not save what is left after spending, but spend what is left after saving."

Ashley Swearingin is the mayor of Fresno.