

Fresno City Council sends spending plan to Swearingin

By George Hostetter
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The Fresno City Council on Tuesday adopted a \$1.2 billion budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin saw no need to personally pitch her spending plan. The vote was 7-0. Funny how piles of cash in the wake of a near-bankruptcy experience can soothe the partisan beast.

“We managed to keep the city solvent,” Council Member Lee Brand said. “Finally, there is daylight in front of us.”

To dig into a budget that promises more money for public safety and parks, said Council Member Sal Quintero, “was like opening a Christmas present.”

The morning began with two amendments totaling about \$60,000. One proposed a few extra bucks in a contingency fund at the City Attorney’s Office. The other vowed to make City Hall more inviting for people with little ones (strategically placed diaper-changing tables). Both motions sailed through.

Swearingin said the vote is another milestone in the city’s financial recovery.

The council’s “unanimous support is a testament to the ongoing change in culture at City Hall,” Swearingin said. “Everyone is firmly committed to providing quality service and to stewarding our resources in a way that creates lasting improvements and reinvestment in our city.”

About \$300 million

Estimated size of general fund budget

The budget now heads to the mayor’s desk for a signature. In theory, this will happen before the fiscal year ends. In practice, the task can meander well into the summer.

It’s hard to imagine Swearingin dawdling. The mayor came, saw and conquered in this budget cycle.

It all dates back to late 2013 and early 2014. The divisive Measure G battle was over. Swearingin had warned voters of financial doom if the residential trash service wasn’t outsourced, yet lost at the ballot box.

Doom never arrived. In fact, Swearingin’s budget for fiscal year 2015 found enough money to buy more equipment for the Fire Department, put aside a few million for a near empty general fund reserve and pay off a mountain of internal loans.

Her message: The reviving local economy hints at a future of bigger budgets.

I believe we could have done a little more for parks.

Council Member Esmeralda Soria

That’s a mixed blessing in any City Hall, Fresno being no exception. Seven council members, each with a unique army of constituencies, were tired of sacrifice.

Swearingin guided events in the weeks leading up to this year’s budget show.

She and selected council members held a news conference in front of City Hall, touting the addition of more (and

better-equipped) cops and firefighters in the new budget.

She and another small group of council members gathered at Vinland Park near Fresno State to pledge nearly \$6 million for new parks and parks maintenance.

She and a few lawmakers met in front of Yokomi Elementary School near downtown to promote a Restore Fresno initiative that includes more code enforcement vigilance.

Swearingin's themes had been given flesh. Public safety remained second to none. Core services would see a measured revival. The general fund reserve must get its due.

Then came the council's mid-June budget hearings. Two things happened, only one of them expected.

The routine was spending requests. The number of motions soon exceeded 15 and topped \$3 million total. City Hall observers wondered if Swearingin's veto pen had enough ink.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin proposed \$2.1 million for the streets program. Council Member Steve Brandau wanted that boosted to \$3.5 million. The mayor agreed.

The surprise was the last-minute arrival of \$4.1 million from Sacramento, reimbursement for a now-obscure deal between City Hall and the state.

Again, Swearingin grabbed the initiative. She promised to spend nearly \$2.3 million on council member motions, including an extra \$1.4 million on streets and \$450,000 for a parks master plan.

About \$800,000 would go to public safety equipment. The final \$1 million would head to the reserve, boosting the balance by June 2016 to more than \$16 million.

Council Member Esmeralda Soria, embarked on her first budget process, wanted the remaining \$1 million for parks. She delivered the hearings' only dramatic touch, waging her battle with style, clarity and a touch of humor. She lost, but served notice that she is fast shedding the rookie label.

The Great Recession put a sometimes angry crimp in council unanimity on spending blueprints. Maybe that's why council members on Tuesday were full of praise. Those first in line at the microphone gave shout-outs to the budget office, department heads, administration officials, City Manager Bruce Rudd, Swearingin and themselves.

Council Member Paul Caprioglio and Council President Oliver Baines brought up the rear. They were reduced to one-word summations of this year's budget hearings.

"Ditto."

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