

Future of the old research lab in southeast Fresno remains uncertain and controversial

By George Hostetter
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A community advocate still believes it's possible to turn an old farm in southeast Fresno into a soccer park.

City officials still believe money talks and everything else walks.

Looks like Fresno could be in for another battle of green-space agendas like [the one that rocked recent budget hearings](#).

Jose Leon-Barraza says he remains committed to somehow turning a 49-acre city-owned site on Peach Avenue south of Butler Avenue into a regional soccer complex.

He and his allies tried this spring to get city officials to see things their way, but failed. City Hall seemed to support growing efforts to put a vocational school on the site.

But Leon-Barraza isn't moping. He sees City Hall as having backed itself into a put-up-or-shut-up spot.

It was streets, streets and streets.

City Manager Bruce Rudd on the City Council's funding priority at recent budget hearings

Scenario One: The campus is built and becomes a success, all but silencing Leon-Barraza.

Scenario Two: The campus idea proves to be so much hot air, leaving the soccer complex as the only worthy alternative.

Leon-Barraza thinks the latter is most likely.

"We don't have nearly enough green space in Fresno," says Leon-Barraza, chief executive of the Southeast Fresno Community Economic Development Association. "That's especially true in southeast Fresno. We're going to press on."

City Manager Bruce Rudd says the pressure isn't on him and Mayor Ashley Swearingin.

"Everything is based on a hypothetical source of money," Rudd says. "Nobody can answer the magical question: You've got a great idea — but how?"

At issue is Fresno's long history of parks woes. The city is notorious on the national scene for consistently ranking at the bottom of surveys of municipal park systems. Perhaps the biggest problem is lack of green space.

At the same time, Fresno has always had money challenges. City Hall during the Great Recession was forced to turn to volunteers to maintain many parks.

Fresno's economic picture began to brighten about 18 months ago. That set in motion the usual free-for-all when government dials up the spending. Department heads and special interests all wanted to be first at the trough.

Swearingin this spring tried to nip this divisiveness in the bud. She held a series of news conferences to tout key spending hikes in her [proposed Fiscal Year 2016 budget](#). [She particularly enjoyed the parks news conference](#), where

she identified nearly \$6 million of help for parks south of Shaw Avenue.

Swearingin's idea worked with police and fire, but not parks. [Leon-Barraza joined other advocates in a PR campaign that blasted City Hall](#) for its alleged indifference to the green-space needs of low-income neighborhoods.

We want to keep that land for a park.

Community advocate Jose Leon-Barraza on the former research lab site in SE Fresno

What followed was a classic example of populist politics. The advocates trumpeted statistics from the general plan that supposedly proved their point. Incensed city officials said the numbers were taken out of context. The advocates doubled down on their claims by holding a demonstration on Mariposa Mall. City officials bickered over whether to fight the advocates statistic for statistic or pretend the other side didn't exist.

Leon-Barraza was hip-deep in it all. But he never lost sight of his basic point: Something's got to be done with the 49-acre site on Peach, about a mile south of Sunnyside High School.

The place was once home to the federal Agricultural Research Service lab. City Hall knew some 15 years ago that the feds were moving their lab to a new site. The big questions: Who would be the new owner? What would replace the lab?

There was early talk of giving the land to the state and building the proposed veterans home there. The site fell into the city's hands about 10 years ago when the Parks Department promised to make it green space.

The site has good and bad.

The good is its location. It's in a fast-growing part of Fresno, with homes, schools, retail and freeways nearby. Swearingin often talks about in-fill development. This has in-fill potential written all over it.

The bad is its current condition. Train tracks run through the site. The northern portion has a modest-sized community garden. Much of the rest consists of weeds and run-down buildings. City officials are constantly chasing away the homeless.

City Manager Bruce Rudd says the Swearingin administration's focus is on building more neighborhood parks, not regional parks.

Leon-Barraza sticks to his original vision. Soccer is wildly popular, he says. Corporate sponsorships and government grants can fund both construction and maintenance. It's not fair to let the current eyesore persist much longer. The original deal with the feds mandates a park.

"We support a vocational campus for southeast Fresno, but not at that location," Leon-Barraza says. "The city has not been a good steward of the buildings and grounds. We don't think just leaving it alone is a good idea."

Nor is Rudd budging. He says the city's finances are better, but not dramatically so. Police, fire and streets all rank higher on the priority lists of politicians and the people. There's no law against Leon-Barraza himself lining up corporate or community funding for a soccer park.

Rudd asks of Leon-Barraza: "What have you done? If nothing has changed, then yes, we're right back in the same place next year."

In the end everything at City Hall smacks of politics, and this issue is no different. For example, Leon-Barraza in 2010 ran for the District 5 council seat that Quintero won. Quintero ran unopposed for reelection in 2014, securing his fourth term since the 1990s. Quintero is termed out in January 2019. Leon-Barraza after a recent council hearing on parks said it's too early to talk about his political ambitions.

Quintero for his part is taking the soccer park controversy and showing District 5 council wannabes how the game is played.

Quintero at budget hearings successfully set aside \$450,000 to fund a parks master plan. This lengthy process is all but guaranteed to include so many powerful stakeholders that no single advocate or group dominates.

Quintero makes clear that his first love for the old federal research station is the vocational school.

But if that doesn't pan out, Quintero says, "my second priority is building a park."

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