

## Pete Weber: Fresno rolls out the red carpet for business

By Pete  
Weber

For the last two years, I've chaired the Business Friendly Fresno Task Force, so I'm going to take some responsibility for Holly Carter's misinformed [Aug. 4 opinion piece](#) in The Bee.

I know Ms. Carter. I respect her. She's a friend. And I should have reached out to her and all the other local public-relations firms to let them know that the city of Fresno has, in fact, torn down and rebuilt its permitting process and is rolling out the red carpet for businesses, small and big. The new processes were launched last year and are now virtually 100% operational (new technology is on the way, but that takes time). The city has launched an outreach effort to inform businesses of its new streamlined processes, starting first with its regular customers like business recruiters, architects, engineers, developers and contractors. We have not yet reached PR firms like Carter Communications.

Pete Weber chairs the Business Friendly Fresno Task Force. He says the city has accelerated and streamlined the permitting process for starting or expanding a business. Brian Vawter Fresno Bee File Photo

First, the facts. Ms. Carter wrote that Fresno's jobless rate was double the state average. The Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that California's unemployment rate for June 2015 was 6.3% while Fresno's unemployment rate was 9.5%. It's certainly higher, but it's not double.

More importantly, Fresno's jobless rate has dropped 2.5 percentage points since January of this year. It's almost half of Fresno's peak unemployment rate during the Great Recession, and in January 2015, the Brookings Institution identified Fresno as one of the fastest growing metropolitan economies in the world.

Ms. Carter provided an anecdotal example of a local entrepreneur who wants to purchase and remodel the boarded-up gas station downtown at Stanislaus and Van Ness. She says, incorrectly, that the deal has fallen apart. The truth is, the city is still working closely with that entrepreneur to help him to "get to yes."

That's the goal of the Mayor's Business Friendly Fresno Initiative that was launched in 2013. It has already eliminated red tape and is providing the innovation and efficiency for which Ms. Carter is clamoring.

If you want innovation, look no further than the new [Business Friendly Fresno website](http://www.fresno.gov/BFF) (www.fresno.gov/BFF), which clearly outlines the city's development process.

If you want efficiency, Fresno now uses four defined project levels, each with an optimized process. The simpler the project, the quicker the review. Many customers get approved at the counter.

The more complex projects get reviewed by department staff to discuss the application, give feedback, and provide for efficient decision-making.

It's working. In 2014, Business Friendly Fresno processed almost 13,000 applications, completed almost 65,000 inspections, checked 5,600 plans, and the average wait time for customers was only 14 minutes. One hundred



percent of the most complicated conditional-use permits and site-plan reviews were completed on time. That success rate has continued through the first half of 2015.

This year, the mayor's budget funds additional staff positions to continue making improvements.

Don't just take my word for it. There are hundreds of examples of Fresno's new attitude toward business. It's not just the high-profile success of the new Dave & Busters that was approved in record time, or Bitwise Industries' new downtown campus which has helped Fresno achieve recognition as a leader in new tech jobs with a 20% bump according to the Internet Association.

It's the small businesses with relatively uncomplicated projects, most of which are now getting approvals over the counter. It's the local developer who complimented Fresno's new "all hands on deck" method for helping to reduce an approval process that used to take six months down to two months. It's the architect who said our project process is now better organized and more to the point. The list of satisfied customers is growing every day.

Because of the success of Business Friendly Fresno, our city was one of 11 cities asked by the White House to join the Small Business Administration's new "Startup in a Day" initiative to develop online tools that let entrepreneurs launch their businesses in less than a day.

As you can see, Fresno's economy is already growing. We've built a national reputation as a city that's making the right moves in the right direction. If Ms. Carter wants Fresno to become a "national example" by making fundamental changes that help small businesses thrive, we encourage her to get on the BFF bus. It left the station two years ago.

Pete Weber is a retired corporate executive and chairs the Business Friendly Fresno Task Force.