

Bill seeks cooperation between schools, City Hall

By George Hostetter
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Top Fresno officials are pitching a plan to deliver better teamwork between City Hall and public schools.

Council President Oliver Baines and Council Member Lee Brand want to create a council committee with authority to discuss issues of mutual interest with trustees of the four major school districts in town.

Fresno City Council Member Oliver Baines says the impetus for the School Liaison Act is simple: "If we can have these broader policy discussions, hopefully we can make better planning decisions in the future."

The four are Fresno Unified School District, Clovis Unified, Central Unified and State Center Community College District.

Baines and Brand say the impetus for their School Liaison Act is simple.

Schools are in the business of educating large groups of people. This requires a lot of infrastructure – land, buildings, transportation, safety, for example. All this in Fresno occurs within a large urban area.

Cities are in the business of serving even larger groups of people. This requires a lot of infrastructure (see above). More importantly, cities are in charge of land-use policy for everyone.

Common sense says schools and City Hall should discuss their common interests. And they have.

Baines and Brand praise former Mayor Alan Autry for his efforts to improve policy-making between City Hall and school districts.

But the talks never were part of a formal structure, one that would both concentrate the participants' minds and lend heft to their conclusions.

Baines and Brand said their act aims to fix that oversight.

"We're suggesting that, during planning phases, we should be talking peer to peer," Baines said during a Monday interview. "If we can have these broader policy discussions, hopefully we can make better planning decisions in the future."

Added Brand: "Planning should not be done in a vacuum."

Baines and Brand have scheduled a City Hall news conference at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday to present their bill. They expect to take the bill to the council on Oct. 29.

There are three parts to the Baines/Brand vision.

The first is the act's nuts and bolts.

The council president would appoint someone to be committee chairperson. Baines, for instance, could appoint one



of his colleagues or himself.

The chairperson would appoint two other council members to the committee. With three members, the committee would be one short of a quorum.

Committee members would serve a maximum of two years.

Sanger Unified School District, which extends into part of southeast Fresno, is not part of the School Liaison Act. That could change, Baines and Brand said.

The three-member council committee would then hold meetings.

But it will take two to tango in these meetings. That's where the four school districts come in. The board in each district would create its own school liaison committee, perhaps with three trustees.

The stage would then be set for some serious jawboning. The council committee, for example, could meet in one month with Clovis Unified. It might be the council committee and Central Unified the next month. The council might even meet with two district committees.

The committees can decide themselves how often they gather and on what scale. Meetings would be open to the public.

The key at this stage, Baines and Brand said, is getting the operating model up and running.

The second part to this plan is the agenda.

Any city hall in a major city handles a bewildering array of topics both big and small. As to the former, city officials have an interest in limiting sprawl. As to the latter, they want to keep the street lights working. Then there's everything in between.

Staff members generally can deal with city-school issues at the street-light level. Baines and Brand said the big stuff – growth patterns, police protection, water supply, etc. – needs policy-maker direction from the get-go.

Hence the "liaison" – forming a link – in the act's name.

The key players in these meetings of committees will be elected officials keenly aware of the power of the ballot box. Baines and Brand said that's a big reason why they expect their act to be a success. Such pressure, they said, will produce worthy recommendations for the committees to take back to their respective legislative bodies.

Clovis Unified trustees this year passed a resolution supporting the Baines-Brand idea. The council members said they're ready to go to Fresno Unified, Central Unified and SCCC.

Planning should not be done in a vacuum.

Fresno City Council Member Lee Brand

The third part to this plan is reality.

No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy. Everyone here is on the same side, yet the unexpected is likely to occur when five big government entities with five elected boards create five committees to chew in a preliminary fashion on high-stakes policy issues whose effects have a tendency to ignore jurisdictional boundaries.

City Hall throws yet another wrinkle into this separation-of-power mix with a mayor whose clout is both charter-protected and of a breadth not to be found in a single person in any of the school districts.

“The success of our local education systems is an important factor in the ongoing revitalization of our neighborhoods,” Mayor Ashley Swearengin said. “That’s why the administration worked with Oliver and Lee to finalize their proposal. We think it’s a terrific idea.”

Said Baines: “Execution is always the issue.”

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