

Editorial: Mayor Swarengin fumbles the Transparency Act

By The Editorial Board

The public has a right to know what government officials are paid because taxpayers foot the bill.

And when those officials fail to disclose salary information, the public becomes angry.

So Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin tried to calm the controversy over her administration's violation of the Transparency in City Government Act by issuing a statement Nov. 6 that began, "We dropped the ball."

Other than promising to provide the Fresno City Council and residents with the amount of bonuses provided to top City Hall employees and updating the city's website to include the latest payroll information, the mayor should have ended the statement right there.

But she didn't.

Just as she did a day earlier when The Bee's John Ellis broke a story about more than \$200,000 in bonuses being paid, Swarengin justified those bonuses by talking about how underpaid City Hall's top executives are.

On Nov. 5, the mayor said, "I'm just grateful they are willing to continue serving our community in those positions when they could easily retire or go work somewhere else and make significantly more money."

What the mayor left out is that money isn't the end-all and be-all for many people. Salary is important. But employment choices also are based on job challenges and job satisfaction, family needs and quality of life.

Swarengin left out, too, that a dollar goes a lot further in the Valley than it does in other parts of California.

If she didn't believe that's the case, we suggest she go on the Internet and type in "Cost of living: How far will my salary go in another city?"

CNN Money, for example, calculates that \$125,000 in Fresno is equivalent to \$177,221 in San Jose.

Besides, the mayor's comments about executives with six-figure salaries and handsome fringe benefits are tone deaf to the struggles endured by people in a county where the median household income, according to the U.S. Census, is \$45,563.

In her statement, the mayor said that "in the midst of balancing all the responsibilities of running the City of Fresno and moving major initiatives forward, we let the last two reports required by the City's Transparency Act lapse."

The mayor needn't remind us that she has a lot on her plate. That comes with being the mayor of California's fifth-largest city – a position she has filled for seven years.

Moreover, Fresno's mayoral office is not a figurehead post. Our city operates under a strong-mayor system that bestows great power to its top elected official. If key members of Swarengin's administration are underpaid, the mayor should fix the situation.

Then immediately tell the public how big the raises are.

If people are worthy of bonuses, give them.

But, again, the people need to know about them immediately.

That way, the public can weigh the worth of those salaries and bonuses against other priorities such as building a small park, adding a firefighter or getting a street paved.

Finally, in her statement, Swearingin said that she wanted the public to know that she didn't "hand out" the bonuses.

On that we agree. The bonuses came from the taxpayers. But she was the one who negotiated the bonuses and approved them.

And then didn't fully inform the public about them for two years.

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