

## Community activist H. Spees says he'll run for Fresno mayor

By John Ellis  
jellis@fresnobee.com

For what seemed like a brief moment a little more than a decade ago, community activist H. Spees stepped into the political arena as a possible Fresno mayoral candidate. Then, almost as quickly, he retreated and instead became senior pastor at Northwest Church.

Now, Spees is back. In an exclusive interview with The Bee, he said he'll enter the Fresno mayor's race. And this time, he said, there's no turning back.

In doing so, Spees becomes the second official mayoral candidate, joining City Council Member Lee Brand, who already has around \$145,000 in his campaign account.

Other possible candidates are police Chief Jerry Dyer and Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea. If Dyer does decide to run – he's been making calls recently and talking to people about that possibility – he would need to move from unincorporated Fresno County to Fresno.

Because Mayor Ashley Swearingin reaches her term limit next year, there will be no incumbent running. That means more candidates are a possibility.

As for Spees, 62, it's been no secret that he's been considering a run. For months, he's been lunching with community leaders, meeting with groups and organizations and, as of late, assembling his campaign team.

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Fresno mayoral candidate H. Spees

"We are at a crossroads," Spees said. "We could be much better than we are. It's time for a fresh look."

For longtime Fresno residents, Spees – whose first name is Harold, but he's long been known as H. – is a familiar face. For years, he was a high-profile presence in the city, serving on boards and committees and working in civic, educational and criminal justice areas. For instance, he was a member of Fresno County's Juvenile Justice Commission in the mid-1990s. He was a personal friend and adviser to former mayors Jim Patterson and Alan Autry.

Through it all, Spees worked from a spiritual foundation. He was at one time well-known as the driving force behind One by One Leadership, a faith-based organization that worked with city and school officials, families and other groups.

Then, in 2003, Autry – nearing the end of his first term in office – asked Spees to run for mayor. Spees accepted.

Three weeks later, he ended his candidacy to become interim senior pastor at Northwest Church. (Autry then decided to seek a second term.) The following year, Spees was named permanently to the post at Northwest.

In 2007, Spees left the church to join Leadership Foundations, a group of faith-based nonprofit working toward the social and spiritual transformation of cities in the United States, Africa and Asia. He still works there, and is the senior vice president for network growth and development. He also is honorary pastor-at-large at First Presbyterian Church in Fresno.

For the past eight years, Spees has been largely out of the public spotlight, though still active in the community.

The core of Spees' political base comes from north Fresno's evangelical community, but he said he's much more than that.

"There's going to be a perception," he said. "I think some of my opponents are going to say 'Well, you know, why do we want a right-wing evangelical pastor?' For 43 years I've been working with communities and cities to make them better, and by tackling the most challenging problems that they have."

Spees lives in the Lowell neighborhood, near Blackstone and Belmont avenues, which is one of the city's roughest areas. Spees grew up in Los Angeles but also spent more than a decade working in low-income communities in Mississippi. He said most of his work has been helping the poor. He has served as a pastor for only the four years at Northwest Church.

And despite his high community profile, Spees sees himself as a nonpolitician.

"I'm an outsider," he said.

He's absolutely the most honest individual I've ever known in my life.

Former Mayor Alan Autry, who is backing Spees

For all these reasons, Spees still has Autry's support. Big-city mayors in the 21st century, Autry said, need skills that go beyond wooing businesses and making sure potholes are filled and the trash is picked up. They need to be able to go into poor neighborhoods and win the trust of residents.

"He's absolutely the most honest individual I've ever known in my life," Autry said of Spees. "You must feel comfortable in rich and poor neighborhoods. H. is uniquely prepared for this job."

Spees said Patterson dealt with crime, Autry talked up Fresno's "tale of two cities," and Swarengin worked the city through the Great Recession. He said he can take the next step of working to lift up all areas of the city.

To that end, he's generally supportive of Swarengin's push to reduce sprawl, focus on infill development and revive neglected neighborhoods like Lowell – his neighborhood.

"But I think it is important to note that we still need to build great houses that the CEO of a company that relocates here would be proud to call home," he said. "We also need to make sure that those humble neighborhoods to the south are built up and stabilized because the city can't have rot at its core."

John Ellis: [559-441-6320](tel:559-441-6320), [@johnellis24](https://twitter.com/johnellis24)

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