

## Jose Leon-Barraza: Fresno risks losing valuable park site

By Jose Leon-Barraza

Ten years ago, the city of Fresno promised its residents and the National Park Service that it would construct a park over a five-year period at a cost of \$13 million if the NPS donated a 49-acre site at 2155 S. Peach Ave. to the city. In 2006, the NPS accepted the proposal and donated the site. The site was previously used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a research station.

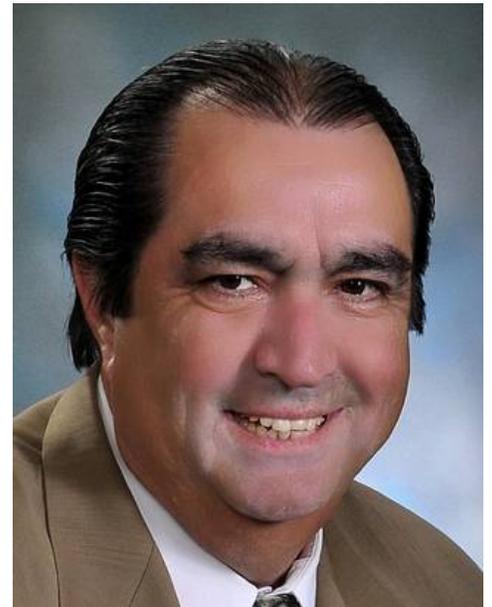
Fresno had plenty of time to start development but unfortunately, from the beginning, the city failed to comply with the most basic requirements of the original agreement involved when this property was deeded to it.

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The city never submitted a site master plan required within nine months after the property ownership transfer, and required biennial progress reports were never filed.

The city has not been a good steward of this property. Some buildings have been vandalized and damaged by fire. The buildings continue to be boarded up contributing to a blighted look at a very nice southeast Fresno neighborhood.

On Sept. 24 the NPS notified the city that, based on the site condition and lack of communication since the property transfer, the bureau found Fresno in substantial noncompliance with the deed terms. The NPS also said if a serious proposal is not submitted to the federal government within 90 days to address this matter and provide a plan for the development of a public park and recreational facilities, the city will need to return the property to the federal government.



At a time when Fresno ranks at the bottom of national park surveys and with the great discrepancy in the availability of city parks in south Fresno vs. north Fresno, city officials should welcome the opportunity that site offers to address the needs of our city.

Fresno has failed to comply with the donation terms and conditions, and residents risk losing this valuable site because of its inaction and oversight.

City staff could have notified the NPS of financial problems that caused delays in the required implementation and development, but why do absolutely nothing to preserve ownership rights?

We believe the mayor's office and City Council should seek an independent review to determine who was responsible for the oversight and omission that has contributed to the NPS threat to remove this park site from city ownership.

The city manager frequently says that Fresno does not have the financial resources to fund the construction and maintenance of new parks. The city manager should contact other Valley cities that have used creative methods to finance park construction and maintenance.

For example, Visalia has the 65-acre Riverway Sports Park with 10 soccer fields; Porterville has 65 acres of soccer fields at the Porterville Sports Complex; Bakersfield has eight soccer fields at its 50-acre Sports Village Soccer

Complex; Modesto has seven soccer fields at its 42-acre sports complex; Hanford has a 35-acre soccer complex; and Lemoore has the 28-acre Lemoore Soccer Complex.

Fresno is the largest city in the Valley. We should not be at the bottom of national park surveys. We should lead others in the construction of parks and soccer fields for a better quality of life for our residents.

The city's recent funding of a parks master plan is a step in the right direction, but for now, we all must do what we can to keep it under city ownership.

Jose Leon-Barraza is president and CEO of Southeast Fresno Community Economic Development Association.