

Fresno, school districts reach agreement to open green spaces to public

By John Ellis
jellis@fresnobee.com

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin on Monday announced that the city has reached an agreement with Fresno Unified and Central Unified school districts to open 16 school sites for weekend recreational activities.

Some additional hurdles remain in the \$1.2 million plan, but city and school officials felt comfortable enough about the agreement to publicly announce it during an afternoon news conference at Roosevelt High School.

The move should add around 340 acres of badly needed green space in the city – especially in areas that are currently undeserved by parks.

It is, Swearingin said, “the beginning of what we believe will be a fantastic partnership between our cities, our neighborhoods and our schools.”

Added Council Member Sal Quintero: “Yes, we are still short of greenspace, but it’s a great beginning.”

The plan is to first open Fresno Unified’s seven high schools – Sunnyside, Roosevelt, Edison, McLane, Fresno, Hoover and Bullard – as well as two sites in the Central Unified School District yet to be determined. Central Unified Superintendent Mark Sutton said he would like to open one site in the northern part of the district and the other in the south.

Those sites – geographically located around the city – would be up and running by March 5. The final seven would open by May 7.

City officials have mapped Fresno’s parks and drawn a half mile mark around each. They then identified each school site. The final seven schools to open will be in parts of the city most underserved by parks. These “obvious park deserts,” Swearingin said, are in central Fresno, as well as the central-west, southwest and southeast.

The city is proposing to fund the \$1.2 million cost through its 2015 fiscal year carry-over budget.

Park activists like the addition of greenspace, but note that more needs to be done to increase park space in underserved parts of the city. Both Council Member Esmeralda Soria and Luis Chavez, the current Fresno Unified board chair and Quintero’s council aide, noted this is a good start, but the parks master plan is still a vital next step.

“This model, we hope to replicate it” across the city, Chavez said.

Sutton said Central Unified was happy to be included.

“I do really appreciate the fact that you remembered the communities – the families, the children – west of the 99,” he said. “It’s something that is drastically needed out there as well.”

The next step, Swearingin said, comes Thursday, when the City Council will be asked to approve the \$1.2 million expenditure. If that happens – and three of the seven members were at Monday’s news conference, just one short of a board majority – the city will issue requests for proposals Friday to area community-based organizations that are interested in applying to operate programs at the schools.

The successful bidders will be identified in early January and contracts are scheduled to be in place by the end of

January. The city and school district legal departments are also still working on final language for the agreements, which also will need both City Council and school district board approvals in both the Fresno and Central districts.

City officials estimate that each school site costs about \$75,000 annually. That includes money for the community-based organization to operate the school site, and money for the districts to pay for additional janitorial help.

“This is a good thing,” Council President Oliver Baines said. “It means there are now more opportunities for young people in my community to go somewhere and have positive interactions instead of being out on the streets.”

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