June 8, 2020

Guiding Principles for a Just and Equitable Economic Recovery
COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund Priorities
2020-2021 Annual Budget Priorities

Dear Mayor Brand and Councilmembers,

The undersigned organizations work alongside residents in City of Fresno neighborhoods impacted by chronic public disinvestment, exclusion from decision-making and institutional discriminatory actions which has significantly shortened life expectancies and barred their access to opportunity. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has only further exacerbated the disparities impacting their communities and the need for the adoption of policies and investment strategies that address long-standing and ongoing injustice. This letter recommends to the City of Fresno: 1) guiding principles for a just economic recovery; 2) COVID-19 emergency response fund priorities; and 3) 2020-2021 annual budget priorities. We urge the City of Fresno to implement the following recommendations.

I. Guiding Principles for a Just and Equitable Economic Recovery

Fresno’s social and economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 can and must center and prioritize investment in disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities and vulnerable populations in Fresno and continue our arc toward justice. In order to comprise a just economic recovery, all spending of public dollars, policies, and programs responding to the COVID-19
public health and economic crises must adhere to and proactively implement the following principles:

1. **Follow the lead of disadvantaged communities, low-income communities, and communities of color** and ensure that residents from these communities hold decision-making power and are meaningfully engaged in all processes comprising a just economic recovery.

2. **Recognize clean water, clean air, healthy food, and safe and stable housing as universal and incontrovertible physiological needs, and basic human rights.**

3. **Prioritize investments to meet basic human needs and critical resource gaps**, and recognize these disparities as foundational inequities barring communities from economic resilience.

4. **Prohibit the advancement and further entrenchment of false solutions to economic, public health, or climate crises**, such as investment in industries that fail to uplift workers and that degrade the environment and quality of life in disadvantaged communities.

5. **Ensure protection of disadvantaged communities and low-income workers**, who have experienced disproportionate and staggering impacts of COVID-19. Moreover, recognize and respond to built historic, institutional, and present injustices by rejecting the unfair status quo in which a zip code can determine access to resources, a clean environment, and economic opportunity.

6. **Develop equitable local economies** that are self-determined, foster community resilience, and provide clean, safe, quality jobs and careers for the people living there.

7. **Swiftly transition away from extractive practices**, including the extraction of wealth and resources from low-income communities, disadvantaged communities, and communities of color.

8. **Be accessible to all Fresnans** regardless of race, color, national origin, socioeconomic status, income level, immigration or documentation status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or ability/disability.

9. **Ensure long-term climate and environmental justice** by strengthening rather than rolling back environmental protections, minimizing the impacts of climate change by promoting community climate adaptation and resilience planning and projects, and building mechanisms that hold polluting industries accountable.

**II. Establish Transparent and Accountable Public Processes**

As stated in the guiding principle #1 above, residents must hold decision making power, be authentically engaged in critical decision making processes and have access to materials and draft policy and investment documents with sufficient time to allow for public review and
analysis. The City has failed to authentically engage residents in recovery efforts by establishing the Mayor’s Fresno Recovery Advisory Committee, a committee that does not meet in public or in any way engages members of the public in its decision-making.

With respect to the development of the 2020-2021 Annual Budget, the City has yet to publicly release budget estimates despite the start of budget hearings on June 9, 2020. While the Mayor has proposed a continuing resolution and posted accompanying annual appropriation resolution enabling documents online, there is insufficient information available to the public regarding 2020-2021 budget estimates. This has created confusion and limits the ability of the public to analyze proposed expenditures and City priorities. The City must immediately make COVID-19 investments and 2020-2021 annual budget materials available for public review.

II. COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund Priorities

The City of Fresno has received well over $100 million dollars of federal funding to respond to the urgent needs this city and its residents are facing as a result of the COVID-19 impacts. This includes $32.5 million for the transportation department, $13 million for the airport, $2 million from the emergency services grant, $4.2 million from the Community Development Block Grant, $100,000 from the Housing Opportunities for Persons with Aids fund, and approximately $93 million for “necessary expenditures incurred due to the public health emergency”\(^1\). None of these funds can be used to replace lost revenues and they must be spent by the end of the calendar year. We are in the midst of an economic downtown which is undermining thousands of Fresno residents’ ability to meet their basic needs. It would be irresponsible and a disservice to Fresno residents to, instead of acting with the urgency this pandemic needs, hold these funds in the hope of the federal government permitting the city to backfill lost revenues. With this funding, the City has the opportunity and the duty to act now to address the immediate needs of our most vulnerable residents and neighborhoods that stem from and that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and to set the City up for a just recovery for all residents in the long-term.

a. Allocate COVID-19 CARES Act to Alleviate Economic Impacts of Most Vulnerable Residents and Neighborhoods

While we appreciate the City’s initial efforts in developing the Housing Retention, the City must increase the initial allocation of $1.5 million to address growing and urgent needs. According to the California Employment Development Department’s Monthly Labor Force Data for Cities, the City of Fresno’s unemployment rate increased to 15.5% from March to April 2020. That is a

total of 37,100 unemployed persons. If the Housing Retention Grant affords grants of $1500 to $3000 per household, the number of families that will receive assistance will only be 500 to 1000 households. Financial support should also include utility assistance for households experiencing hardship.

The City must also prioritize funding to provide immediate, direct cash assistance for workers and families, especially residents who were excluded from the federal CARES Act aid, ensuring that those who are undocumented and/or those who did not make enough income to file 2018/19 tax returns, are eligible to receive funds.

The City should also continue to use COVID-19 emergency response funds for the purchase and provision of food for food banks; food distribution centers (ie: Fresno Unified School District food center who is feeding whole families not just students); and food delivery services for low income and elderly populations. Residents are going hungry while food is rotting in the fields. The City should add more funds to the Micro Farmer Crop Buyback Program and prioritize the purchase of food from small local farms and farmers of color while creating a provision that connects these farmers to the food banks and supports collaborations with the goal of feeding people and preventing food waste.

Finally, Fresno County epidemiological data indicates rising cases and mortalities associated with COVID-19. Publicly available data also demonstrate Latino and Black residents are disproportionately impacted by and are most vulnerable to COVID-19. To the best of our knowledge, the City has not proactively taken steps to direct CARES funding to explicitly target resources to address racial disparities. The City must take immediate steps to direct funding to establish free mobile and walk up testing sites, hire contact tracers in neighborhoods and ensure provision of personal protective equipment to residents, households and businesses in critical neighborhoods.

c. Fund Free Legal Assistance to Support Tenants Rights

Residents of Fresno are reporting that landlords are still harassing them despite the current state and local emergency ordinances that have required eviction moratorium protections. Immigrant communities are especially at risk as these populations are often targeted because of their status, preferred language, inability to access federally-funded legal aid services, or simply not knowing their rights. Now more than ever, tenants need access to resources that will enable them to uphold their rights. The City needs to establish an emergency legal assistance fund and make

2 EDD Labor Force and Unemployment
resources available for tenant rights education and the provision of direct legal service to
lower-income and undocumented tenants. Many organizations and groups have shifted their
scope of work in response to COVID-19, and private attorneys are looking to help those who
need it most. By establishing a legal assistance fund, it will protect tenants from mass evictions
once the Judicial Council emergency ruling is over.

b. Healthy Accessible Housing

COVID-19 has left many Fresno residents living in atypical housing or no housing at all,
especially vulnerable to the impacts of this pandemic. For instance, overcrowded housing is a
common situation where there is not sufficient space for social distancing. Meanwhile, these
same individuals are often identified as essential workers required to go to work without being
provided proper protective equipment exponentially increasing their risk of getting COVID-19
and passing along the virus to those with whom they share housing. Fresno also has thousands of
residents experiencing homelessness who lack the necessary access to running water in order to
adhere to the Center for Disease Control’s recommendations of maintaining proper hygiene.
These situations are not a new phenomenon, but have been exacerbated by the pandemic. It is
imperative to use some of these funds to respond to this crisis by creating sufficient emergency,
transitional, and permanent affordable housing opportunities for all Fresno residents.

This is an onerous task that requires the involvement and cross-collaboration from a multitude of
agencies and sectors to preserve, produce, and protect affordable housing. One method to
produce additional housing units for vulnerable populations can be through the acquisition and
provision of affordable housing like mobile homes, hotel rooms, blighted homes, and other
resources. Furthermore, Fresno’s Planning Department found in their 2019 Downtown
Displacement Report that over half of Fresno’s population is rent burdened, paying over a third
of your rent towards housing. Most homeowners, and even more low-income homeowners, are
similarly paying at least a third of their income towards their mortgage. We recognize the City
does not have the authority to assist all of its residents with their rent or mortgage in this time of
need, however, it can and should pass a resolution in support of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar’s
proposal H.R. 6515, a comprehensive proposal to stabilize and increase access to decent quality
affordable housing that would support homeowners, tenants, landlords, and lenders alike and that
could prevent a housing catastrophe in California which would only further destabilize our
economy. The City should actively monitor and support state legislative solutions that will allow
tenants’ to remain in their homes and that will eliminate tenant debt burdens accrued during the
pandemic.

The City of Fresno will not be able to control another outbreak and continuous spread of
COVID-19 unless all City residents have safe uncrowded housing where they can practice social
distancing and proper washing recommendations. As such, it is imperative and the duty of the City to act with the utmost urgency to protect and provide residents with safe accessible housing.

III. 2020-2021 ANNUAL BUDGET PRIORITIES

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, many communities within the City of Fresno have been suffering from poverty, homelessness, unaffordable housing, and have been overburdened by high levels of air pollution. If funding is not prioritized to resolve these issues now, the most vulnerable population of citizens will fall into even more detrimental circumstances.

The current 2019-2020 fiscal year general fund expenditures equals $347 million dollars and the existing expenditures do not reflect priorities that residents have raised to the City for several years. Of that amount, over $184 million dollars (53%) are allocated to the Fresno Police Department (FPD). In this moment of reimagining how we define “public safety” both nationally and locally, the City must take immediate action to begin reinvesting portions of FPD’s budget that would be better utilized for proactive community priorities that will truly result in increased health and safety of all residents such as those outlined below.

a. Affordable Housing Trust Fund ($10,000,000)

This is the first step in combating the housing crisis. It must include the creation of a sustainable funding source for an Affordable Housing Trust Fund. The Trust can be used for a variety of options to provide stable, safe, and accessible housing opportunities for all Fresno residents. Objectives of this fund will include but are not limited to support the construction of more affordable housing units especially for low-, very low-, and extremely low-income populations; supplement the gaps of financing to build truly affordable housing; assist with first-time homebuyer programs; support transitional housing; and rehabilitate homes for purchase and for rent for low-income households. These resources should target those in protected classes, people experiencing homelessness, such as youth, veterans, seniors, and the disabled, youth transitioning out of the foster care system, formerly incarcerated individuals, and single parents. This Affordable Housing Trust Fund can be supported by using $5 million dollars from COVID emergency response funds and $5 million dollars from the general fund, CDBG and other discretionary funding sources.

By providing this initial funding to develop an Affordable Housing Trust Fund that would then be sustainably funded through its own means, it will allow the City to leverage other regional, 

3 Note: we welcome and would appreciate the opportunity to meet and discuss potential funding solutions that have been successfully implemented in other cities.
state, and federal public dollars to finance affordable housing construction. Additionally, a sustainable funding source will ensure that there is consistent funding to support projects that may need gap financing. Furthermore, this will also support the City’s adherence to state law by implementing Housing Element Programs # 5 to identify and seek housing funding sources, #8 to assist home buyers in purchasing their first home, #10A to conduct and publish an assessment of housing related needs in mobile home parks through communications with residents and owners, identifying city, state, federal and private resources to address those needs, #19 to incentivize development on small and large lots, and #22 to rehabilitate housing for low-income households. This City has yet to implement several of these programs at all in contravention of state mandates to adhere to the commitments and timelines contained in its housing element. Gov. Code Sec. 65587(d)(2).

b. **Truck Reroute Study ($500,000)**

The Southwest Fresno Specific Plan (SWSP) calls for the completion of a study to reroute large commercial diesel trucks that currently travel through West Fresno neighborhoods. SWSP, policy M-10A, p. 8:28. The increased burden of diesel emissions and particulate matter correlates with the poor air quality and detrimental health impacts. The CalEnviroScreen shows Southwest and South Central Fresno scoring in the top 5% of census tracts for the worst air quality and poor health outcomes. The SWSP states that the City aimed to complete the truck reroute study by 2018. To our knowledge, however, we are in June of 2020 and the study has yet to be funded or initiated. Also, within the Community Emissions Reduction Plan of the Community Air Protection Program (AB 617), a truck reroute study is also required. This is a critical need as the AB 617 area, which is adjacent to Southwest Fresno, continues to increase industrial and distribution development, while ignoring the overburdened air quality impacts on communities of color. Similarly, it is critical to adequately fund the implementation of this study once complete to help improve the health outcomes of this community in the long run. We cannot continue to ignore this community’s plight and the empirical data that clearly demonstrates the disproportionate impacts.

c. **Increased Public Services in Poor Communities**

Illegal dumping, poor road conditions, lack of street lights, stop signs, stop lights, and crosswalk safety lights are some of the daily concerns that affect the safety and quality of the community and that residents have asked to be funded. As funds are appropriated, the City and its staff must ensure an equitable distribution of these funds recognizing the dire need in more established neighborhoods that have seen minimal or no investments in their neighborhoods.
Of these concerns, illegal dumping, especially in alleys behind homes, is always brought up among conversations with community members. The City must allocate resources specifically to initiate pilot programs that assess and follow the actions of what other cities have successfully done to reach a sustainable solution to the illegal dumping problem. This pilot program should also evaluate how to better support efforts in which the city works alongside community groups who are already leading efforts to clean up communities. Over the last several years, it has been communities and community leaders coordinating efforts to clean alleys that are constantly dumped in. These spaces are a blight in these communities and also create unsafe conditions especially when used by children heading to school. Cities like Seattle, Baltimore, and Los Angeles have all created solutions to reactivate these spaces. Local residents are also implementing their own solutions by turning these spaces into art pathways where those walking can enjoy the artistic efforts from volunteers and take pictures.

d. **Advance Peace ($300,000)**

Advance Peace is a program dedicated to ending cyclical and retaliatory gun violence in urban communities. In Richmond, where it was founded, it proved to reduce gun violence by 55%. In Stockton, where it has been most recently adopted, they have seen a reduction in non-fatal shootings of 40% compared to this time last year. As of late April, Fresno was going in the opposite direction, with shootings here up 67% compared to the same time period last year. The City of Fresno’s nominal investment in Advance Peace each year can not only save lives (most importantly), but also prove to be an efficient, evidence-based investment of resources – with each homicide in our city ultimately costing taxpayers likely more than six times the amount of the annual investment into Advance Peace.

It is not by coincidence that communities of color have been long plagued with poverty, poor educational systems, high crime rates, and lack of job opportunities. When a city’s government does not invest in all of its communities through all the aforementioned recommendations, negative outcomes in all aspects of economy, health, housing, and land use will persist.

e. **Increase Park Funding by at least 4%**

Parks, trails, and outdoor spaces have proved to be an essential component for good health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fresnans have relied on accessing parks and other green spaces to maintain their physical and psychological health. Parks strengthen our communities and make neighborhoods more attractive places to live, work, and play. The City of Fresno has severely underfunded parks for decades. In fact, Fresno spends far less per capita than most other comparable cities. Dedicated investment in parks is needed to address the identified needs in the Parks Master Plan which include $175 million just to fix existing parks. At the very least, we call on the City of Fresno to increase the general fund allocation for parks by 4% to bring the total general fund allocation for parks to 10%. Additionally, we support Southeast Fresno Community
Economic Development Associations’ request for $90,000 from Park Development Fee Revenues that would help leverage up to $8.5 million from State Proposition 68 grant funds to implement the SE Fresno Regional Park and Soccer Complex Project.

In conclusion, the 2020-2021 budget needs to be planned accordingly to improve the lives of all of the citizens of Fresno. As always, we as advocates and members of the City of Fresno are ready and willing to answer any questions that you may have and to schedule meetings with you to further these discussions to improve our city.

Sincerely,

Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability

Fresno Barrios Unidos

Building Healthy Communities, Fresno

Faith in the Valley

Root & Rebound