June 23, 2020

Submitted via Electronic Mail
City Clerk, City_Clerk@bakersfieldcity.us

Re: City of Bakersfield Annual Budget Priorities

Dear City Council members, staff and Mayor Goh,

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, many communities within the City of Bakersfield have been suffering from poverty, unaffordable housing, and historical disinvestment. The historical disinvestment in communities of color has resulted in negative impacts to the health, well being, and prosperity of these communities. We work alongside residents that live in the communities of Casa Loma, and East Bakersfield and have worked together to identify investment priorities that should be reflected in this year’s budget and future budgets.

Parks and Green Spaces, affordable housing, basic infrastructure, community centers among other priorities have been identified as important and necessary for residents to feel safe, secure and be healthy. However, there has been a historical disconnect from what community residents need to thrive, and how the city is choosing to invest tax-payer dollars. City funds allocated from the general fund to invest in these identified priorities have been underinvested with little visible change coming into their local neighborhoods. These priorities continue to be deeply underinvested while Bakersfield Police Department (BPD) continues to be heavily and disproportionately funded with $99.26 million (45.39%) for FY 2019-2020 and expected to have a 10% increase in FY 20-211, 2.

In this moment of reimagining how we define “public safety” both nationally and locally, the City must take immediate action to conform its policies and investments to a comprehensive and inclusive approach to public safety. This budget - both the political and moral underpinnings of our City’s operations- can reflect that shift. The City of Bakersfield can take steps forward today by reinvesting portions of BPD’s budget that would be better utilized for community priorities that will truly result in increased health and safety of all residents. Some proactive investments elevated by local residents in the past couple years to ensure that public health and safety are

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1 City of Bakersfield Website, Open Budget, General Fund FY19-20,
2 FY 2020-21 City of Bakersfield Proposed Budget
prioritized within the City of Bakersfield include: affordable housing, parks and green spaces, basic infrastructure, community centers and youth programming, and a participatory budgeting process.

**Invest in Affordable Housing:** The City of Bakersfield and the County of Kern are experiencing an increase in homelessness and currently lack investment in building affordable housing. While experiencing a worldwide pandemic due to COVID 19, we have seen the existing housing need exacerbated and families struggling to pay their homes. For extremely lower income households, 72% of Bakersfield homeowners and 78% of renters are cost burdened, utilizing more than 50% of their income to pay their rent or mortgage. To ensure that no more Bakersfield residents face the threat of homelessness the City must act quickly and allocate funds to address the lack of affordable housing, and continue their efforts to put in place rental and utility assistance programs for the most vulnerable and impacted residents due to lack of affordable housing and COVID 19 economic impacts. The city must ensure that their residents feel secure and safe by having a place to shelter in properly and sleep at night. In addition to addressing the acute threat to tenants at this time, the City of Bakersfield should invest in programs and infrastructure to support affordable housing protection, production, and preservation. Necessary investments can include:

- Development of an Affordable Housing Trust Fund which will create a sustainable funding source to fill financing gaps in housing development and preservation
- Development of a nexus study to better understand the housing need and guide development of future programs and policies
- Housing rehabilitation to increase the stock of affordable housing and to improve neighborhood safety and wellbeing.

**Invest in Parks and Green Spaces:** Parks and green spaces have critical positive health impacts for urban residents who have limited access to greens spaces. During this COVID 19 pandemic we have seen more than ever how critical it is to have green safe spaces in local neighborhoods for residents to walk and exercise as they adhere to necessary public health guidelines that ask people to stay in their neighborhoods and properly social distance. Investing in creating and maintaining greenspaces in local existing neighborhoods should be prioritized to promote good health and combat obesity and cardiovascular diseases that disproportionately affect communities of color. Green spaces may include community gardens that will bring an opportunity for continuous learning for the young to the elderly and help combat food insecurity and food deserts that pervasively affect communities of color across the state of California.

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3 City of Bakersfield, 2015-2023 Housing Element, pg 44
Last year we saw the City of Bakersfield investing about 22% of Measure N funds into the Recreation and Parks Department, but the big ticket item investments were not into local neighborhood parks and recreational services, but into large profitable amenities such as Mesa Marin and Kaiser Permanente Sports Complex. This does not reflect the priorities that local residents have shared regarding the importance of investing in neighborhood parks and recreational opportunities.

**Invest in Basic Infrastructure:** Access to basic infrastructure such as sidewalks, curb and gutter, street lights, and adequate pedestrian, cycling and vehicle signage is important to the safety and health of a community. Residents have specified a need and opportunity for comprehensive infrastructure investments in complete streets (sidewalk, curb and gutter, etc.), and more trees in historically disinvested communities. Residents in the community of Casa Loma live a unique reality, as the City of Bakersfield and the County of Kern boundaries meet within this community. We ask that the City of Bakersfield continue to coordinate with the County of Kern to address any infrastructure needs, and invest in the area to well match the increased investments being made by the County and avoid considerable differences in fringe and county island communities such as Casa Loma.

**Invest in Community Centers and Youth Programming:** Community centers and youth programming play an essential role in increasing community cohesion and creating opportunities for continual learning, character development, serve as cooling centers and oftentimes work as safe havens for youth and the elder who do not feel safe at home. While there are currently some community like centers and youth programming available, oftentimes these programs require a membership to participate. Because community spaces and youth programming are important for the community to have a healthy outlet with opportunities for entertainment, education, and character development residents would like to see community centers paired with parks where the general public can have access to programs at no cost. Constituents have also highlighted the need for cultural programming, STEAM (Science Technology Engineering Arts Mathematics) programming and a diverse sports program. We recommend that the city invest in the creation and maintenance of free of charge community centers and youth programming that is adjacent to parks and/or green spaces within low income neighborhoods in East Bakersfield and Southeast Bakersfield like Casa Loma.

**Participatory Budgeting Process:** It is critical that City of Bakersfield residents inform how their tax dollars are being utilized to make Bakersfield as healthy, vibrant, and equitable as possible. An avenue to make this possible is introducing a participatory budgeting process (PBP).

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5 Bakersfield Public Safety and Vital Services Measure, FY 2019-20 Allocation Proposal
6 City of Bakersfield Recreation and Parks, Bakersfield Public Safety and Vital Services Measure N presentation
A PBP would allow constituents to have direct say and decision making power as to where funds are allocated based on their local priorities. We ask the City of Bakersfield to implement a robust and meaningful PBP in Bakersfield to ensure that the budget reflects community-identified priorities.

The City of Bakersfield must consider these five investment priorities in their process to finalize the municipal budget to ensure that the budget reflects the investments that constituents have prioritized and will continue to prioritize. We look forward to working with the City Council, Mayor Goh, City Manager Clegg, and other members of City staff to inform a budget that represents both constituent priorities and the start of substantial, sustainable, and meaningful change that is equitable and just, and includes decision making processes that are transparent, and incorporate genuine, robust, and meaningful public participation.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jasmene del Aguila, Policy Advocate, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability
Nataly Santamaria, Promotora Network Manager, Vision y Compromiso