



September 14, 2020

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Fresno, California 93721

Chairman Buddy E. Mendes
Fresno County Board of Supervisors
2281 Tulare Street
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RE: Fresno County FY 2020-2021 Recommended Budget

Dear Mr. Rousseau and Chairman Mendes,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the FY 2020-2021 Recommended Budget and the immense work it took considering the COVID-19 global pandemic and the devastating Creek Fire occupying County Staff's time and resources.

The recommendations listed below are directly informed by the various unincorporated communities through Fresno County that have been advocating for structural changes for years. The pandemic did not show us any new issues that need to be addressed in Fresno County, rather it put a spotlight on the structural changes that this county must implement in order for every resident to have equitable access to health, resources, opportunity, and shelter. Fresno County must recognize the long and short term health, social, and economic impacts that wildfires, excessive heat, droughts, and unhealthy air quality will leave on communities if no action is taken. The threats posed by climate change are real and will result in severe devastation, as we see currently with the Creek Fire, if bold decisive action is not taken. We urge the Board to act on climate, to support community resiliency and to support the health and well being of all Fresno County residents.

Unprecedented times require unprecedented leadership. We welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively to implement solutions proposed below. Budgets demonstrate values and commitments. The 2020-2021 budget must respond to community priorities and plan for a healthier, more sustainable future for all of us.

I. \$1.5 million allocation for a community driven climate resilience and preparedness plan

Fresno County must allocate funding to develop a community driven plan that encompasses both adaptation and mitigation to increase the resilience of communities and reduce the long term severe impacts climate change will have on the health and safety of residents, communities, forests and agricultural lands. Community residents in Fresno County have long requested an action to address the impacts of climate change including but not limited to air quality, dust, walkability, groundwater depletion, excessive heat, wildfires and green space accessibility. Additionally, Senate Bill 379 requires local jurisdictions to adopt a climate adaptation plan or component in the safety element no later than January 1, 2022. The devastating effects of climate change have been felt throughout Fresno County in the form of extreme and prolonged heat, droughts, and erratic weather patterns to name a few. These patterns will only worsen further devastating the County's economy and putting its residents at even higher risks of serious illness, hospitalizations, and worse. Fresno County cannot afford to continue putting this planning document off and must be a top priority in the 2020-2021 budget.

II. \$1.5 million allocation for immediate opening and operating cost for Cooling Centers throughout Fresno County

As of September 7, 2020 there are only 5 cooling centers in Fresno County, 4 in the city of Fresno and 1 in Sanger. Rural residents, many of which do not have access to air conditioning, must travel upwards of an hour to reach the closest cooling center. This is completely inexcusable and is a public health hazard that must be mitigated. Fresno County must immediately begin working with communities and CBO's to identify locations and provide funding to equip locations in rural parts of the county and ensure there is equitable access to cooling centers targeting lower-income areas where homes disproportionately may not have access to air conditioners. In addition, the county must develop a clear plan that ensures ongoing operation and maintenance costs will not burden low-income residents.

III. Allocate Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to address needs SB 244 Analysis



Fresno County is currently updating their SB 244 Analysis, listing the various disadvantaged unincorporated communities in Fresno County and their deficiencies in basic infrastructure. Communities throughout the county identified issues with flooding, wastewater, fire protection, drinking water, among many other issues collected by surveys issued by Public Works staff. Again, many of these issues identified have been apparent to communities for years, and have never been addressed by Fresno County. CDBG funds are allocated to Fresno County to address these very issues, however the administrative expenses listed in the budget are severely limiting the total amount available to fund infrastructure projects..

Through our analysis, we noticed the high administrative expenses for administering the CDBG program and the Housing program. Currently, Fresno county is budgeting \$659,038 for CDBG administrative expenses, almost \$100,000 above the 20% cap. Concurrently, Housing administration expenses are budgeted for \$798,688, we ask that these expenses be reevaluated to ensure effective and efficient use of allocated taxpayer dollars designed for project construction. Fresno County must also re-budget local general fund dollars for capital projects in DUCs to address historical infrastructural inequities that are linked to public health concerns. Additionally, Fresno County must allocate dollars for the CDBG advisory committee to develop a comprehensive plan of projects based on need to prioritize funding in an equitable manner.

IV. Funding for affordable housing development and permanent housing retention program in Fresno County

Fresno County must invest in the development of affordable housing. Housing in Fresno County has become increasingly inaccessible to many residents living in rural communities. From farmworkers, to elderly folks, the unavailability of affordable housing has led to a greater number of irregular housing, overcrowding, and a growing unhoused population. This issue became unavoidable once the pandemic overwhelmed the county and the most vulnerable and likely to spread COVID-19 where those who did not have access to “shelter in place” or quarantine effectively.

Fresno County’s rental market is a billion dollar industry, where almost 50% of the county’s population is made up by renters and over 65% of those renters are paying unaffordable rents, and frankly homeownership is not a possibility for many residents¹. As the state and county continue to find solutions to battle the wave of evictions caused by COVID-19 with limited CARES dollars to address the inability of vulnerable populations to make rent, it is critical for

¹ Evicted in Fresno, page 1, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w2O__CstpJHwLDmioYao7OZwCk6fKpu9/view

the county to provide a permanent legal defense fund to ensure that local legal aid have the resources to assist tenants. Federal and State orders aimed at helping tenants have created a complex process that is almost impossible to navigate without legal advice. In a 2019 report by the California Bar Association, the Central Valley was recognized as an attorney desert, meaning that many legal needs are often unmet. In the report, it was noted that for every \$1 invested in legal housing defense aid, it saved \$2.69 in homeless services².

We urge Fresno County to develop an Affordable Housing Trust Fund, invest at least \$10 million dollars as initial funding, and identify sustainable funding sources. Affordable Housing Trust Funds have been established in some form in various communities across the country to achieve the preservation and production of safe housing for all incomes. Some of the programs these funds can cover include, but are not limited to:

- Development of new affordable housing units to rent and own
- Construction of low barrier and transitional housing for those experiencing homelessness, recently incarcerated, and so on
- Homeownership Programs such as first time homebuyer down payment programs, educational programs, and general support for buyers navigating their first purchase
- Legal aid and defense fund to protect the thousands of tenants being formally and informally evicted every year

In establishing such a fund, Fresno County will model and lead inland California on how a government can aid in improving housing conditions and ameliorating the housing crisis only exacerbated by the pandemic. Whatmore, establishing a local funding source also allows the County to pursue additional state dollars like from the Local Housing Trust Fund Program, and be more competitive for many other state programs such as the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities Program.

V. Housing Element implementation must be funded in the FY 2020 Budget

As you know, Fresno County has 270 days from the court's order in March to comply with the writ. We remind the county that the following actions must take place:

- Implementation of programs 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, in the Housing Element
- Identification and analysis of infrastructure and service needs of disadvantaged unincorporated communities and identification of financial mechanisms and resources to

² California's Attorney Desters, page 8,
<http://www.calbar.ca.gov/Portals/0/documents/accessJustice/Attorney-Desert-Policy-Brief.pdf>



address those needs as required by Government Code section 65302.10 and amend the County's Land Use Element to incorporate that analysis.

VI. Transportation Deficiencies in Communities

Transportation inequities have long been an issue in Fresno County. Many communities lack basic infrastructure, some not even having paved roads. This leads to unleveled roads, extreme flooding, missing safe walking or biking paths, and even lacking adequate streets for emergency vehicles to get in and out in an appropriate amount of time. Coupled with a complete lack of transportation options for residents to access health and grocery stores, communities are left isolated and disconnected unless you have your own working vehicle. When the pandemic hit rural and fringe communities, residents found it difficult to access COVID-19 testing, basic supplies, and safe sidewalks to walk outside. It is vital for the future of the region that Fresno County Public Works staff are given the resources to work alongside Fresno COG and the community to assess and prioritize transportation investments to promote a regional transportation networks that works for all communities, including but not limited to, pedestrian infrastructure, culturally relevant and reliable public transportation investing in zero emission technology, and increased connectivity.

For example, for the approximately three dozen residences that call the community on Britten and Cherry Avenues home, the unpaved unleveled road has been a hazard and a blight since its inception. This road is a public health and safety hazard that if an emergency vehicle, like an ambulance or fire truck, were trying to get in and out could decide whether or not someone lives or not as precious time is lost trying to manage these dangerous roads. The road is so dangerously unleveled it requires one to drive carefully at 5 MPH and floods so severely that it is not uncommon for USPS to refuse to deliver mail and makes it nearly impossible for residents to leave their home. Though the road is privately owned, the owner is interested in transferring receivership of the road to the County so the community has access to a safe and adequate road as every county resident should. We recognize the economic circumstances the county finds itself as a result of the ongoing pandemic, however, the health and safety of its residents should remain the key priorities for any local government and adequate investments in the most basic of infrastructure needs to be prioritized.

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We look forward to working with staff on creating an equitable budget that promotes a resilient Fresno County community. For any question please feel free to reach me at (559) 920-0558.

Respectfully,

Leslie Martinez
Policy Advocate