

Governor could take lessons from Fresno's mayor

By Dan Walters / The Sacramento Bee

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During their last pre-election debate, Sacramento Mayor Heather Fargo and her ultimately successful challenger, former pro basketball player Kevin Johnson, sparred over whether Sacramento should emulate Fresno, its slightly more populous municipal cousin.

Johnson chided Fargo about Sacramento's budget deficit and pointed to Fresno, which had recently reported a healthy surplus. Fargo insisted that she had been a good fiscal steward and blamed budget problems on a rapidly declining economy.

It was an opening for Johnson to throw a telling jab: "Fresno is living in the same United States of America as we are."

The much different fiscal circumstances of these two otherwise comparable cities contain a lesson for politicians at all levels: Heed Aesop's fable about the spendthrift grasshopper and the thrifty ant.

When the economy is booming and revenues are pouring into public coffers, those we elect to office feel terrific political pressure from special interest groups, especially unions, to boost spending and equally heavy lobbying by those on the right for tax cuts.

Unfortunately, the instinct to placate pleaders usually outweighs the fact that good times don't last forever. That's how the state got itself into deep fiscal trouble. Former Gov. Gray Davis and legislators squandered most of a one-time windfall of revenues on spending and tax cuts that could not be sustained, and successor Arnold Schwarzenegger continued the pattern.

That's how the City of Vallejo wound up in bankruptcy court, having overspent a cornucopia of housing boom revenues, mostly on lavish salaries and fringe benefits for police and fire personnel whose unions were too influential.

Sacramento didn't go as far as Vallejo, but like many other local governments largely spent what it took in rather than amass reserves.

For instance, although Sacramento's police budget is marginally smaller than Fresno's -- a gap attributed to Fresno's larger population -- Sacramento's fire budget is more than 50% larger than Fresno's, thanks largely to the political clout of the local firefighters' union. In fact, Sacramento's overall general fund spending is much higher than Fresno's.

There are two big reasons for the discrepancy -- ideology and structure. Politically, Fresno is a markedly more conservative city, which means its leaders tend to be more conservative and less beholden to unions than those in liberal Sacramento. Moreover, Fresno's mayor is an operational executive while Sacramento's is mostly a figurehead with real power wielded by a city manager.

That means that outgoing Fresno Mayor Alan Autry was able to enforce fiscal discipline and leave his successor, Ashley Swearengin, with a healthy surplus.

Autry, a former athlete and actor, has often been ridiculed for his good-'ol-boy mannerisms, but when it comes to fiscal responsibility, he could teach his pal Schwarzenegger, another former athlete and actor, a thing or two.

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