


Valley recreation programs face cuts Tight budgets threaten summer offerings.

By Marc Benjamin / The Fresno Bee
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Recreation programs that keep children under adult supervision are in jeopardy this summer as agencies struggle to balance their budgets in a slow economy.

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A popular Clovis summer recreation program that for 17 years has provided free child care at three Clovis schools will not be offered this year unless the city finds someone else to pay for it.

In Selma, summer swimming pool hours will be cut.

Other Valley cities are still trying to figure out whether they can afford to keep running similar services.

When budgets get tight, city officials usually put police and firefighters at the head of the line for limited funds.

"Recreation and parks are at the bottom of the food chain," said Eric Frost, administrative services director for Visalia.

For now, he said, Visalia doesn't plan any recreation cuts -- but it's still waiting to find out whether the state will balance its budget by taking money from local governments.

Fresno officials haven't decided what they'll do, said Heather Heinks, parks department spokeswoman.

"Budgets are getting tight, and we are working with less money," she said. "Our goal is not to reduce services to anyone."

Selma plans to cut an hour a day at the community pool and at each of its two community center sites. It also moved its parks and recreation offices into Selma City Hall. Combined, those changes should save the city about \$10,000 to \$11,000, said City Manager D-B Heusser.

The deepest cuts are expected in Clovis, which is grappling with a \$4.5 million budget deficit.

The first casualty of recreation budget cuts is the eight-week summer program, Play Clovis Way.

Clovis officials say they will try to salvage the program by seeking donations from community groups or businesses. The city will need to secure its funding base by early May or cancel the program.

"It's a very good program," said Tom Copeland, a father of two girls who have been in the program three years. "If you look at what they provide, it's better than what a day care would."

About 200 elementary school-age children a day participate in Play Clovis Way. Last year, it logged more than 6,000 visits.

Parents drop children off in the morning, and the children can stay for a half-day or full day and receive free lunch under adult and teen-counselor supervision. The program focuses on different themes each week, such as arts and crafts, water games, playground games and noncompetitive sports.

The program, which is normally operated at Sierra Vista, Tarpey and Weldon elementary schools in Clovis, costs about \$32,800 to operate each summer, said Glen Beatrez, Clovis recreation supervisor.

Clovis Community Foundation Chairman Mark Keppler said that if the city asks, his board would consider financial assistance for Play Clovis Way, even though it may not fit the group's funding guidelines.

The foundation typically expects the groups it funds to provide matching dollars, and won't fund things forever, Keppler said.

This year, the city would look for just enough funding to keep the program going, said Tim Kearns, a Clovis recreation specialist.

The program can be run this summer without new equipment, he said.

"I think people in the neighborhoods expect us to be there," Kearns said.

Children are frequently waiting when supervisors arrive at the school sites.

"If we pull away from Tarpey or Sierra Vista, there will be a lot of families who can't find a place to send their kids," Kearn said.

Children from first to sixth grade can participate, and those in seventh grade and above can serve as "junior aides" and assist supervisors in leading activities.

Some high school students are paid as supervisors. "Junior aides" get paid in "teen bucks" that can be put toward discounts on other recreation programs or on video games or compact discs.

"It keeps a lot of kids out of trouble," said Codi Gonzales, a senior at Clovis High School who has served as a paid program supervisor. "They have somewhere to go instead of being home without parent supervision."

Sebastian Wenthe, 10, has been part of the program for two years and likes the art and playground activities. If he stayed home in the summer, Sebastian said, he probably wouldn't be doing anything interesting.

"I might be playing outside in my neighborhood," he said. "There wouldn't be much other choice."

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