

Local & State

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New Fresno group plans to take a hand in politics

By JOHN ELLIS

THE FRESNO BEE

More than 50 Fresno-area individuals — many of them prominent business and civic leaders — have formed an organization with the idea of using the political process to improve the area's quality of life.

The group, known as Fresno Citizens for Good Government, will take positions on issues, pen opinion pieces and host candidate forums. More importantly, it will endorse and fund candidates at the local and state levels through a companion political action committee.

Peter Weber, chairman of the board of directors, said the group's mission is to "encourage elected officials to exercise community stewardship in pursuit of solutions that are in the best interest of our community."

The key, Weber said, is collaborating on important Valley issues

such as air quality, education and Fresno's socio-economic disparity. "Collaboration has not been a hallmark of our elected leaders," he said at a noon news conference at California State University, Fresno's Smittcamp Alumni House, where the group's formation was announced.

Elected officials will be quizzed on such topics as the best way to deliver government services, ideas for regional solutions to problems and thoughts on fiscal responsibility. This will begin at the local level — likely the Fresno City Council — and likely involve the budget as the city begins to wrestle with a spending plan for the next fiscal year.

Those candidates and elected officials who share the group's philosophy and back its agenda will be rewarded with financial backing. And, members say, the backing could be significant — not simply the \$2,000 or \$3,000 dona-

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Group: Leaders say they aren't doing Autry's bidding

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tions given by many large donors in the community.

Weber said the group's formation was not an indictment of local government, but "there is dysfunctionality in the system." Weber also said the group was not a front group backing the policies of Fresno Mayor Alan Autry and targeting certain council members at odds with him, such as Brad Castillo.

Weber and Ken Newby, who are part of the group's board of directors, are also members of Autry's Council of Economic Advisors.

Castillo, who attended the noon news conference, said the group and the Fresno council were striving for the same goals. "Sounds like they are thinking on the same wavelength as we are," he said.

Fresno Citizens for Good Government sent out a letter to Clovis, Fresno and Fresno County elected officials, as well as Fresno and Clovis school district boards, the Fresno County Board of Education and countywide office holders such as sheriff, clerk and district attorney.

Dues are \$240 per year, and the money will go to administration. PAC money will be raised separately.

Among the founding members are Ashley Swearingin, executive director of the Central California Futures Institute in Fresno; businessman Jerry Cook; H. Spees, CEO of One by One Leadership; Fresno State President John Welty; businessman Doug Davidian and community activist Nancy Richardson.

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