

Person *of* the Year

For the first time, *Fresno Magazine* is proud to name a Person of the Year. This person -- who prevailed after an arduous campaign and showed the community she could lead Fresno in the direction of positive change -- is Ashley Swearengin.

By Conlan Spangler



Ashley Swearengin can't stand in the lobby of City Hall for three minutes without a passerby approaching to discuss some issue, or perhaps to just say 'Hi'. Even before she's sworn in as Fresno's next mayor, Swearengin's time and attention are in high demand. "My way of preparing for this job is getting as many things as I can done ahead of time," she says. "I wanted to do it now. I didn't want any downtime because we just have a lot to do."

While the photographer sets up equipment for her photo shoot, if no one is physically vying for Swearengin's attention, she pokes at her insistent Blackberry. She's reviewing her schedule or setting up new appointments or maybe planning that night's family dinner. But when it's time for the photo, she's completely present, taking direction and offering suggestions.

Likewise, when she sits down to discuss her plans as mayor of Fresno, her Blackberry is silenced. She sits up straight and smiles. The dark pattern of her skirt-suit includes subtle golden threads that glimmer gently in the light. Her pastel blue-green eyes are sharp and attentive. This is the mayor.

Despite previous political appointments from former-Mayor Alan Autry and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Swearengin is a relative political outsider -- something she views as an asset. Her previous experience consists primarily of economic development work. She was the co-founder and chief operations officer of the Fresno Regional Jobs Initiative (RJI), an organization whose purpose is creating new jobs for Fresno. "My core passion in life is to see Fresno's economy improve," she says. "As mayor,

my goals haven't changed for the city. It is all about improving the prosperity levels and improving the economy."

She speaks with a warm authority; she knows what she's talking about, but is careful to project an openness, a willingness to listen. This is, in fact, one of her administration's priorities.

"We'll be doing more community outreach, and community forums," Swearengin explains. "We'll take advantage of technology. There'll be a specific and concentrated push from City Hall to reach out to our citizens and get them more

addressed." She believes her administration will be able to effectively work with the city council, as well as the county Board of Supervisors, to address pressing economic and public safety concerns. She acknowledges there will be challenges. "There are different perspectives and different interests that everybody brings to the table," she says. "But I think right now there's an appetite for change that we've got to take advantage of."

Her open, collaborative and hopeful attitude may prove her greatest asset as the national economy worsens and the effects

“My way of preparing for this job is getting as many things as I can done ahead of time...”

involved." Swearengin is launching a community advisory panel comprising of a broad cross section of the citizenry. "I want every perspective," she says, "every ethnic group, every cultural interest, public, private -- every viewpoint possible -- represented on that panel." The panel will meet regularly to provide feedback to City Hall, engage the community and encourage participation in government.

This desire to collaborate extends to her colleagues in government. "I really believe that this is a unique time in Fresno," Swearengin says, "and that there's pretty widespread agreement on the issues that need to be

are felt at home. "The environment in which we're working now is a cold, hard reality," she says. "But in any situation you look for where the opportunities are, and what your strengths are. For example, we're in a major economic downturn; credit has dried up. However, the federal government is looking at a major stimulus package that would invest in public works projects. So now is an opportunity for us to address some of our public works challenges in the downtown area, knowing that if we do it now, when the market comes back we'll be in a better environment to attract private investment."

She recalls the struggling economy of the '80s and early '90s, a time



when cities in Silicon Valley were "getting their act together," she says. Then came the international economic boom of the late '90s, yet Fresno saw little benefit. "I remember those days," Swearingin says, "and thinking, 'Man, the next time the economy is in the trough, we gotta use that as a time to prepare. We cannot let our foot off the gas pedal. We gotta get our act together so that we can ride the next wave.' So in a sense this is a good opportunity for City Hall and for people who are working hard to bring our downtown back. We've got to get our act together."

The revitalization of downtown remains one of Swearingin's top priorities. "If you talk to private investors who are looking at investing in the downtown area," she says, "they're really relying on the city to remove bottlenecks, to get the little things right, to

get traffic circulation right, to get signage right [and] to work with property owners who have deteriorating buildings." The city must confront these issues to "create an investment-worthy environment," she says. "That will be our approach: lay the foundation [and] then let the private sector invest.

"I believe that's the target," she says, "to improve the overall economic climate: downtown and the neighborhoods in the downtown area that, right now, are really struggling. That's not to say there aren't important policy initiatives that are city-wide, but I believe that's where our focus needs to be in order to get the lift for the whole city."

Another meeting looms for Swearingin, as the clock -- that ever-present dictator -- speeds along. She offers a final thought:

"Even though we are facing some of the most difficult economic times, the ground's been plowed, the seeds have been sown" for revitalization -- something she credits to the Autry administration. "So, as bad as the news is," she continues, "I cannot help but be optimistic about Fresno."

There's an enthusiasm in Swearingin that becomes apparent as she speaks. She recognizes the difficulties, but is excited about working to solve problems and build a better Fresno. "Seeing Fresno's economy improve" may seem an unlikely "core passion in life." But after listening to Swearingin speak -- unfiltered and eager -- about her city, it is a passion that is hard to doubt. And more importantly, it's a bit contagious. [fin](#)