

April 24th, 2014

Honorable Mayor, City Council and City Staff
678 West 18th Street
Merced, CA, 95340

Dear Honorable Mayor, City Council and City Staff,

Thank you for making youth a priority for Merced's City budget. In order to realize this priority, the Invest in Our Youth Campaign welcomes the opportunity to offer the attached proposals for inclusion in the 2014-15 budget.

The proposals are the product of 5 months of collaborative work. This included extensive outreach to community members and leaders, a survey of 500 Merced youth, discussions with local business owners, a review of city documents and data on the needs of young people, feasibility discussions with experts in youth programming in both the public and non-profit sector, and meetings among the members of the Invest in Our Youth working group.

We are eager to meet with you to discuss these proposals in detail. If you wish to set up a meeting, please contact our community organizer, Lisa Marroquin, lisa@anewcalifornia.org.

In developing these proposals, we are building on the work we have done together over the past two years - starting with the re-opening of McNamara pool and the funding of the youth council.

We look forward to a productive discussion of these new proposals, and partnering with you to ensure that Merced provides the opportunities and supports that our youth need.

Sincerely,

The Invest in Our Youth Campaign

INVEST IN OUR YOUTH

PROPOSALS FOR THE 2014-15 BUDGET BY THE INVEST IN OUR YOUTH COALITION

Our Goals:

- Provide greater hope for our youth by expanding opportunities for them to learn new skills, develop healthy lifestyles and lead productive adult lives.
- Promote partnerships between the city, community organizations, businesses, agencies, educational institutions, and other interested Merced residents so that we can more effectively collaborate to serve our youth.
- Foster public safety and economic development in Merced by preparing young people for the workforce and offering positive alternatives to unhealthy behavior.
- Ensure that youth are Merced's highest priority.

Merced has many youth who need services. The programs that we are recommending address these problems:

- In the City of Merced, about 36 percent of youth live below the poverty line. This is 15 percentage points higher than the state's child poverty rate.
- Merced County has the highest jobless rate in the San Joaquin Valley. Unemployment for 16 to 19 year olds is twice the rate for adults age 20 and above.
- 41 percent of the youth in Merced have health risks due to being obese or overweight.
- According to the Lucile Packard Foundation's Kidsdata report, Merced County has the highest rate of youth who are either not in school or not at work.

EMPLOYMENT

Goal – Prepare young people for the workforce by connecting them to positive, supervised and supported work experiences while they are teens.

Need – The national unemployment rate of youth and young adults has skyrocketed during the recession, and is the highest it has been since the government started collecting data in 1948. It is costing this country \$8.9 billion annually in lost earning and other costs: \$60 per taxpayer every year. Here in Merced County, the recent unemployment rate was 17 percent. This compares with an unadjusted unemployment rate of 8.5 percent for California and 7.0 percent for the nation during the same period. And unemployment for 16 to 19 year olds is twice the rate for adults age 20 and above.

Fewer and fewer young people are able to get a first job, which is often an essential step in preparing for a successful career. In Merced, the situation has worsened significantly for teens searching for job experience. The county's major youth employment program run by the Merced County Office of Education (MCOE) with federal funds once had spaces for 800 young people during the

summer. The program was eliminated four years ago. Furthermore, the year-round program offered by MCOE has been cut by 43 percent since 2010. A job for a young person is widely considered the best possible violence prevention strategy. A recent study documented crime reduction in Boston and attributed it to a new summer jobs program. In fact, the country's most renowned and largest anti-gang program, Homeboy Industries, is a jobs creator. Father Greg Boyle, the program's founder and leader, is known for his statement, "Nothing stops a bullet like a job."

By helping provide meaningful workforce experiences to youth, the Merced City Council will be making an investment that will pay significant dividends to the city in the years to come. Under the most stark example, the investment can be measured in dollars and cents. According to the VERA Institute of Justice, the State of California spends more than \$47,400 on each inmate, and we all know the price of prisons is paid by each taxpayer.

But the investment in jobs should be measured in hope and opportunity. Jobs build self-esteem and increase self worth and self-reliance in our youth. The city council--or any number of public agencies--should be a partner in building the foundation that not only creates jobs, but makes good jobs possible in the future. Shaping a positive tomorrow for a city, county or community shows leadership and a true commitment to citizens.

Support from Merced's business community – Merced's businesses offer youth the greatest opportunity for employment. For that reason, the Invest in Our Youth Campaign conducted interviews and surveys of 149 small business owners in the downtown area. The results were inspiring and overwhelming: 123 support creating a new job and training program for young people; and 69 would have students at their establishment as interns. Business owners championed a holistic approach. They want interns to be trained - learn about resume writing, interviewing skills, and business ethics. They see youth employment programs as necessary to creating a strong workforce for the City of Merced. There is no doubt that our local business community wants to be a partner in preparing youth for the workforce.

Budget proposal 1

CREATE A SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PILOT FOR MERCED YOUTH BY BUILDING ON THE SUCCESSFUL MODELS OF THE PAST.

Program description – The Merced County Office of Education is prepared to create a summer jobs program specifically for 100 Merced City high school youth. The program would operate for six weeks, and the youth would receive 192 hours of on-the-job work experience and be paid \$9 an hour. In addition, the young people would receive the support services they need for work, such as bus passes and uniforms. MCOE would provide training in workforce skills, including resume writing, job retention strategies and interviewing. The youth in the program would be supervised and mentored by credentialed MCOE Career

Advisors and administrators. The Career Advisers would also work with employers to ensure that the match between the youth and the employer was working effectively.

MCOE is the ideal sponsor for a pilot youth employment program. It has been running programs with funding from the Workforce Investment Board since 2000. It has a very high success rate in terms of job retention and youth who get ongoing jobs after the program. Over many years it has developed the infrastructure that is needed for success. MCOE has the ability to get work permits quickly for young people, a ready list of hundreds of employers who have been screened to take on young workers, and skilled and experienced staff in supervising youth. MCOE also has training materials to enhance and support the job experience.

Cost - \$232,200 for a six-week program

- Work experience wages-\$172,800
- Support services (uniform/bus pass)-\$15,000
- Workers comp-\$8,640
- Instruction-\$16,832
- Administrative costs-\$18,928

RECREATION

Goal – Promote the social and physical health of our youth, and provide positive alternatives to the “streets.”

Need – Merced youth have expressed ongoing frustration with the lack of recreational opportunities in the City. The City of Merced Park and Open Space Master Plan, written in 2003, confirms their views: “...the overall level of recreation program service in Merced is low when compared to other cities of similar size...”

Since 2003, the situation has gotten much worse. The Parks and Recreation Department received more budget cuts than any other city function. Our reading of the on-line Merced budget indicates that its budget was cut by 67% which equals \$2.3 million. The budget explicitly for youth recreation programs at recreation centers was cut even more drastically - going from hundreds of thousands in 2007-08, to several thousand in the past year. These reductions occurred while the population of Merced soared by almost 20 percent.

The neighborhoods with the largest number of youth—and particularly youth from families who cannot afford to pay for recreation--have two major centers, McNamara and Stephen Leonard parks, but they have been closed completely. Also, during this time, funding for the city’s major recreational community organization, the Boys and Girls Club, which operates out of the city-owned McCombs Center, has been drastically reduced to \$35,000, compared to its \$171,747 allocation in 2010.

Yet Merced youth have a high need for a robust array of recreational opportunities. In the most recent health survey conducted through the school district, 50 percent of youth answered “not at all true” to the statement “I am part of clubs, sports teams, church/temple or other group activities” and another 18 percent said that it was only “a little true.” Physical activity is no longer considered a “frill”; it is an essential core service of any community, a necessity of good health and positive social development.

It is important to note that when Merced youth express their deep frustration about having “nothing to do,” not only are they correct, but it reflects badly on the community as a whole, and causes concern for potential home buyers and new businesses. Investing in activities for youth is a key part of an economic development strategy.

Cost Benefits – The 2003 City of Merced Park and Open Space Master Plan points out that recreation programs provide a very high level of service per unit of cost. Their cost-effectiveness is further enhanced when the recommendations in the Master Plan about partnerships are adopted: “It is important to recognize that private non-profit groups...are an essential part of a city-wide recreation delivery program. Because the community as a whole benefits from this partnership approach, the City of Merced should encourage and promote joint efforts.”

Budget Proposal 2

A. CREATE A MODEL YOUTH CENTER AT MCCOMBS

Background – The city built the McCombs Youth Center in 2002 with redevelopment dollars. The center, which is the city’s largest indoor recreation facility, has been ably run by the leading youth recreation non-profit in Merced, the Boys and Girls Club, and has received commendations for being a partnership model for other communities.

McCombs was intended as a hub that could be utilized by many agencies within the community for Merced’s youth. The space, 20,000 square feet, includes a full-size gymnasium, multi-purpose rooms, an industrial kitchen, arts facilities, game rooms, a computer lab, outdoor recreation space and parking.

The Boys and Girls Club is an affiliate of a highly regarded national organization and raises private funds through grants and donations. Last year, 732 volunteers provided over 10,000 hours of service to the youth of Merced. Its partnerships with Merced College and UC Merced bring extraordinary talent into programs such as tutoring, and special events, such as science fairs. Clearly, the club is leveraging very significant resources on behalf of Merced’s youth, and the club keeps its fees to a token annual membership. No one is turned away.

Yet the city’s minimal support (\$35,000) of the Boys and Girls Club means that McCombs cannot fulfill its mission (building maintenance and compliance

requirements, such as insurance and auditing, cost \$150,000 a year). As a result, the hours of operation are limited, and many agencies, including the city government, cannot utilize it as intended. The building is closed on weekends and evenings after 7pm – prime times for youth activities. Furthermore, some of the equipment, like game tables and weights, needs to be replaced and enhanced. From the outset community members have been calling on the city to effectively utilize this precious resource. In interviews for the creation of the 2003 Master Plan, people called for “expanded hours” and pointed out that it “needs more of everything – staff and resources.”

This proposal calls on the city to provide the funds to the Boys and Girls Club to enable the McCombs Youth Center to fulfill its original vision of becoming a model recreation facility for the community.

New programming – The facility could open during the weekend, and from 7pm to 9pm on weekdays, greatly expanding the number of youth who could participate. The Boys and Girls Club could have an active gym all weekend, expand its classes, provide fitness activities, and sponsor more youth events. It is also anticipated that many agencies would be able to provide more services at the center, and that the City of Merced itself would have a facility to use for events and programs with expanded hours. Agencies that would use the space include: We’ced Youth Media, Merced Organizing Project, Mentoring Odd Jobs Organization, Boy Scouts, Building Healthy Communities, and California Youth Connection, which serves foster youth. The proposed programs would target youth city-wide, but with a focus on the most under-served.

Cost – Total cost - \$180,600

- Professional and purchased services \$33,600
- Facility and building \$117,500
- Program cost and supplies \$29,500

\$180,600 is a relatively small investment that would be leveraged many times over to ensure a much more vibrant and heavily utilized resource for the young people of Merced.

B. PROVIDE FULL YOUTH RECREATION PROGRAMMING AT ALL PARKS, STARTING WITH MCNAMARA AND STEPHEN LEONARD PARKS

Background – With the youth recreation budget down so dramatically, there is very little programming at the city’s recreation facilities. Maximizing the use of existing facilities and rebuilding the youth recreation programming would be a cost-effective investment in greatly expanding constructive and fun activities for Merced’s young people. McNamara and Stephen Leonard Parks are in particularly high need areas of the city, areas that are densely populated with children and youth. The recreation centers in these two parks have been closed for two years. Parents, children and youth are eager to see them re-opened.

Proposal – The Invest in Our Youth campaign recommends that the recreation centers in McNamara and Stephen Leonard Parks be re-opened for drop-in recreational activities. As a start, we recommend that there be three types of sessions: school year, summer and school holidays. Each park would have adequate staff for these services – 2 staff at each site, 4 hours a day during the school year, and 8 hours a day during the summer. Activities would include games, arts and crafts, science, cultural events, awards ceremonies, and group discussions. The staff would be augmented by volunteers, and based on previous experience, we anticipate 2 – 3 youth or adults to volunteer each day. We also propose that there be two youth interns in each program, who will receive training and stipends. Summer interns can be placed from the proposed summer youth employment program. Key to the success of the program would be the training and supervision by an existing recreation supervisor.

One option could be to contract this program out to non-profit agencies in the community. If the City chooses to do this, we recommend that an RFP be issued widely so that there is an open transparent process – and the greatest possibility of attracting the most qualified and effective provider.

Cost – The administrative structure and the scope of the program would determine the cost at each park. The budget for the program would have to include direct staffing (a minimum of two staff at each site providing a total of 1,160 hours per year for a minimum of \$10 an hour). Additional costs would include the costs of refurbishing, maintaining and utilizing the facility (janitorial, utilities, insurance, etc); program materials and supplies; professional services for specialty programs (such as science), furniture, TV, computers and game tables; supervision of staff and volunteers; and youth stipends. We anticipate that the annual program cost would be approximately \$50,000 for each site.

Policy

We recognize for the first time in many years, there is a projected increase in the city's budget, and while we anticipate "push back" from the council, we strongly believe these are modest budget augmentations for our city's youth. In fact the total request reflects only .25 percent of the overall budget (based on last year's budget) and only 1.5 percent of the General Fund. Our children are the future of Merced, and the future starts today.

The budget requests are in lock step with what we've heard from every corner of the city: we need to do more for our youth. We need to invest in our children. These recommendations are a step in the right direction, but in the long term, and to avoid these budget battles in the future, we look forward to working with council to craft revenue streams that are sustainable, fair and future-focused.