

Bakersfield's Budget Needs Fiscal Discipline and Investment — Not a Choice Between Them

By Eric Arias, Bakersfield City Councilmember, Ward 1

Michael Turnipseed is right that Bakersfield residents deserve to know the difference between a "balanced" budget and a "structurally balanced" one. Where I part ways with him is on what that means for how we govern.

Let me be direct: cuts are not the only solution, but they must be part of one. I've never believed we can hold vacant positions forever and call it fiscal discipline, and I've never pretended that spending restraint alone can carry a city with our needs. Both things are true at once, and pretending otherwise — in either direction — is how you get bad budgets.

That's why, in early 2025, I was one of the first members of this council to push for a hiring freeze — before oil prices softened further, before sales tax growth flattened, before the pressures Mr. Turnipseed cites in this year's budget became as visible as they are today. I didn't wait for a crisis to force the conversation. I raised it when it was still possible to get ahead of it. That freeze, and the vacancy savings that came with it, is a meaningful piece of why this year's cuts were smaller and more targeted than they could have been.

I also agree we need to get to a structurally balanced budget — a budget where ongoing revenue actually covers ongoing cost, year after year, without leaning on reserves or hoping sales tax stays strong at the top of a cycle. Where I disagree is on the timeline and the method. We should get there progressively, not by taking it out of the departments and programs that working families in Ward 1 and across this city depend on every day. Fire response times, park maintenance, code enforcement, public safety staffing — these aren't line items to be zeroed out in pursuit of a cleaner spreadsheet. A structurally balanced budget achieved by hollowing out core services isn't a win. It's a different kind of failure, just one that shows up as service cuts instead of a ledger gap.

Part of that progressive path has meant reducing our reliance on volatile PSVS sales tax revenue to prop up the general fund. That work is underway, and it won't happen overnight — nor should it. Weaning a \$900 million budget off a revenue source that funds real, ongoing obligations takes years of deliberate substitution, not a single budget cycle of political will. Anyone who tells you it can be done in one year, without consequence, isn't being straight with you.

It's also worth remembering that Bakersfield has been here before. In 2015, a collapse in oil

prices and more than 3,600 countywide layoffs drove a 15.6 percent drop in the city's first-quarter sales tax revenue, opening an estimated \$6.6 million gap that the council had to close in that year's budget. The following year, continued oil industry losses cost the city another \$3.5 million in sales tax, forcing a leaner budget with a hiring freeze on top of it. Those were hard years, and the city got through them — not by pretending the shortfall didn't exist, and not by only cutting, but by making disciplined, incremental adjustments while still trying to protect core services. Even after that period, our general fund deficit kept growing, which is exactly why I'm grateful to the voters who stepped up in 2018 to pass Measure N — the one-cent public safety sales tax that gave this city the stable, dedicated revenue it needed to stop patching structural gaps with one-time fixes. That history is a reminder that "structural balance" isn't a switch we flip. It's a discipline we practice, especially when oil and sales tax cycles turn against us, as they inevitably will again.

None of this changes the scale of what's still in front of us. Bakersfield has real, large problems that this budget — or any single budget — cannot fully solve: a homelessness crisis that strains every department it touches, public safety staffing that hasn't kept pace with our growth, parks that are underfunded and, in some parts of this city, still unbuilt, and infrastructure liabilities like our wastewater system that will eventually land on ratepayers whether we plan for them or not.

Mr. Turnipseed is right that deferring those obligations doesn't make them smaller. But the answer isn't to choose between fiscal discipline and investment in the city residents actually live in. We can't simply defer these items to get to a fiscally sound and balanced budget — the grown-up thing to do is both.