

[Fresno Bee Commentary, Sunday, June 13, 2021](#)

## **'It's like a war zone around here.' Time has come for ban on fireworks in Fresno, Valley**

By Marek Warszawski

Three years ago I ventured out onto a sparkler-thin limb expecting to get lit up like a Ground Bloom Flower.

Instead, a surprising thing happened: Most of the emails and phone messages (roughly a two-thirds majority) shared the belief there's nothing safe nor sane about how Fresno and other central San Joaquin Valley cities permit fireworks sales around the Fourth of July.

Three main arguments were presented: the horrible air pollution spike, caused primarily by people setting off fireworks in front of their homes; the flood of calls to local fire departments, which in Fresno leads to a suspension of emergency medical services; the harm to household pets, evidenced by the bump in take-ins and injury pick-ups at animal control shelters.

Readers wasted little time adding a fourth: the effect on veterans and others coping with PTSD.

"If you write another article on fireworks, I hope you can include veterans in your concerns," Donna of Fowler emailed in July 2018. "Unless you know of someone personally with PTSD, you can't imagine what it is like."

No, Donna, I can't. Thankfully. But before those wooden stands start popping up all over the place this year, I can lend my voice to the growing public outcry against fireworks.

That cause was reignited by a group of Fresno residents weary of the loud explosions in their neighborhoods building up to July 4th. Nearly 1,000 of them signed an online petition asking Fresno Mayor Jerry Dyer to author an ordinance that would ban all fireworks, both legal and illegal, except on designated holidays.

"Every year it's worse and worse," said Don Heflin, who has lived in the same west Fresno house for the past 27 years. "It's been like a war zone around here for weeks."

Heflin, a local guitarist who founded the Central Valley Blues Society, recently called the police to report illegal fireworks on opposite ends of his street.

On one end of Heflin's block near Shields and Brawley avenues, someone has been lighting mortar-type fireworks that explode in the air. On the other, someone else has been lighting M80-type firecrackers that explode on the ground.

"They were like bombs; you could feel them as much as you could hear them," Heflin said. "My wife was actually on the phone with Fresno PD when one went off. They were supposed to send an officer out — never came."

### **FRESNO COUNCILMEMBERS COOL ON FIREWORKS BAN**

Dyer, Police Chief Paco Balderrama and Fire Chief Kerri Donis had a meeting scheduled to discuss illegal fireworks. Police have fielded more than 600 calls about their use during the last month.

How does Dyer feel about a citywide ban on all fireworks except for July 4th and other holidays? I couldn't get an answer but was informed the mayor would soon address the subject at a press conference.

Likewise, I reached out to four city council members to take their pulse regarding a fireworks ban. Three replied, but only one sounded interested in supporting the cause: Miguel Arias, who indicated he would introduce an ordinance at the June 17 council meeting that increases the fines for setting illegal fireworks to up to \$5,000.

"I hear them going off where I live every other day and they're getting louder and more explosive," Arias said.

Where does Arias stand on making all fireworks illegal within the city limits, 365 days a year? Which is how things were for more than seven decades until 2000, when then-Mayor Jim Patterson urged the City Council to rescind the ban.

"I'm not there yet, Marek," Arias replied.

Quite the pity. Because any politician willing to wade into the fireworks issue will discover a tidal wave of support. Kind of like I did — and three years later the emails and calls haven't stopped.

Last month, I received a 2,112-word missive that contained everything from conspiracy theories about the lack of action over fireworks ("Do you think somebody is getting kickbacks?") to a few interesting ideas about how to combat their use. Among them: adding harsher warning language to packaging; using drones to catch those who set off illegal mortars and explosives; heightening education in public schools on their dangers; and promoting public laser shows as an environmentally friendly alternative.

### **LEGAL FIREWORKS STILL CAUSE FIRES, AIR POLLUTION**

"Nobody ever seems to get cited for fireworks," Evelyn of Fresno wrote. "Why isn't the gov't and police actually trying to find ways to empower us to fight back instead of letting the fireworks industry walk all over us?"

Excellent question, since many of the same local politicians who sound eager to combat illegal fireworks defend the legal variety.

"A ban would hurt nonprofits who depend on those revenues and for residents who are responsible," Councilman Mike Karbassi texted. "I know that for the Aquarius Aquarium and the EOC LGBTQ Resource Center, fireworks sales are their biggest fundraisers."

That might be true. But it also begs the question how Fresno's nonprofits, youth clubs and church groups survived before 2000 when fireworks sales were illegal. They must've managed.

Even when used responsibly, legal fireworks contribute greatly to the annual Fourth of July particle pollution spike. ("That smoke is going to stay on the ground and smoke out their neighbors," Valley Air District spokeswoman Jaime Holt told me once.) They're also responsible for a sizable number of the emergency calls placed to local fire departments. And as anyone living here knows, the drought has made fire conditions especially bad.

How many more fires have to start, how many more pets have to run away and how many people have to suffer PM 2.5-induced heart attacks and strokes until something is done?

Because the Valley's fireworks problem is only getting worse, and its citizens increasingly won't be silent.