



Perris Wins Helen Putnam Award for Enchanted Heights Outreach

The City of Perris has won the prestigious Helen Putnam Award for its innovative public outreach campaign to bring a \$15 million sewer system to the disadvantaged community of Enchanted Heights.

The Helen Putnam Award for Excellence represents the pinnacle of achievement from the League of California Cities and Perris has won this honor twice in the last five years.

The League recognizes with the Putnam Award excellence in local governments that work to improve the quality of life in their communities, implement efficiencies in service delivery and operations and provide services responsive to the local community. The City this year was honored in the Inter-governmental

Collaboration category for working with county, regional and state agencies to replace inadequate and leaking septic tanks with a state-of-the-art sewer system. In 2008, Perris garnered the Helen Putnam Award for Planning and Environmental Quality, the result of installing solar panels throughout City Hall reduce energy consumption and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Perris is just one of five of California's 482-incorporated cities to capture two Helen Putnam Awards since 2008.

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch, members of the City Council, City Manager Richard Belmudez and Assistant City Manager Ron Carr, who led Perris' Enchanted Heights outreach effort, were among those on hand to receive the award Wednesday during the annual League of California Cities Conference in San Diego.

"This award really speaks to the ability of the City to put together relationships with our partners to great improve the quality of life for Enchanted Heights residents," Busch said. "Without those partnerships, the project would not have become a reality. It was a real team collaboration and everybody involved pulled their weight. It is a great accomplishment."

Belmudez credited the Perris staff for making Enchanted Heights a success story.

"It's an example of how our staff is always using progressive thinking to solve problem," he said. For Perris to win the top municipal award in five years, Belmudez said, is "remarkable and extremely impressive."

Municipal officials from around California heaped praise on Perris for forging the partnerships that ultimately brought sewers to Enchanted Heights and for its year-long public education and outreach campaign that convinced residents in the disadvantaged community to support the project.

In his keynote address to hundreds of elected officials across the state, League of California Cities President Mike Kasperzak said communities should emulate places like Perris as they tackle their own challenges.

"It's okay to copy success," said Kasperzak, who also serves as mayor of Mountain View. "Don't reinvent the wheel. Find out what works. See what innovative cities are doing see what you can take home to your community."

Bringing to reality a new sewer system in Enchanted Heights was no easy task. Existing septic tanks leaked for years, as Enchanted Heights evolved from a resort community of one and two-person residences to larger families consisting of children, parents and grandparents. The City partnered with Riverside County, Eastern Municipal Water District, the California Department of Public Health and the State Water Resources Control Board to install new sewers the project at no cost to Enchanted Heights residents.

Even after the partnership obtained the necessary funding from the state to install new sewers to Enchanted Heights residents, significant challenges remained to convince neighborhood residents to support the project.

Many Enchanted Heights residents speak limited English and were reluctant to allow anyone onto their property, even contractors to hook their homes to main sewer lines and replace the aging and leaking septic systems which created potential public health hazards.

So City staff members, administrators and elected officials went to the community several times over a period of months, speaking to individual Enchanted Heights' home owners and small groups of people, answering questions, listening to concerns and gradually convincing them to support the sewers.

Four public meetings drew hundreds of residents who signed the necessary "right of entry" forms allowing construction crews to complete the sewer connections. With those in hand, the project broke ground in August, 2011 and is expected to be completed in less than two years, months ahead of schedule.

The City's innovative approach to public education and its partnerships with local, regional and state agencies has been hailed as a model for other communities to emulate when trying to improve disadvantaged communities. Elected officials and environmental experts across California continue heaping praises on the outreach effort and the end result.

Assemblyman Paul Cook hailed the Enchanted Heights sewer project for "vastly improving the lives of residents."

Leah Walker, an engineer for the Department of Public Health, said it will "protect public health and enhance protection of groundwater and the environment."

Sen. Bill Emmerman called the City's outreach effort a "model for other agencies to follow."

City officials say they are pleased to get the award but garnering accolades is not why they brought the new sewers to Enchanted Heights.

Perris Mayor Pro-Tem Al Landers said City officials have worked for 15 years to alleviate leaking septic tanks in Enchanted Heights. As mayor in the mid-1990s, he held public meetings attended by Enchanted Heights residents and learned about the potential health concerns from the inadequate septic systems.

He said Perris' commitment to installing new sewer lines never wavered and that the hard work and commitment ultimately produced results.

"It's not acceptable in this day and age to have our residents exposed to raw sewage," Landers said. "This is the type of project that exemplifies the type of City Perris is—one that is progressive and aggressive. It's not just this City Council that sought to correct this issue. It's the work of previous councils as well."

City Councilman Mark Yarbrough said he took the Enchanted Heights project personally. He used to live in Enchanted Heights, as did his mother. He said the City deserves the award but the benefits to the community outweigh public recognition and acclaim.

"We did it because it was the right thing to do," Yarbrough said. "It was something that needed to be done. This is how government should work—to solve problems that affect the lives of our residents."

Perris City Councilwoman Rita Rogers praised the "targeted, focused outreach" that ultimately proved successful. She also touted the strong leadership of the City of Perris, Riverside County, EMWD and the state agencies for their commitment to see the project through.

"Perris gets results," Rogers said. "Perris continues to thrive."

Perris City Councilwoman Joanne Evans called the sewer project "a tremendous accomplishment" that represents the best of inter-governmental collaboration.

"When you sit down at the table and set aside all your differences, you can really make a difference in the lives of every day residents," Evans said. "I am tremendously proud of our staff who worked to make this happen. And I am more proud of the fact that the new sewers will make the lives of Enchanted Heights residents 100 percent better."

The Helen Putnam Award is named after a Sonoma County resident who was a mother, school teacher, principal, mayor and county supervisor. Putnam was a person who viewed meeting one's potential as the measure of success. Excellence, to Helen Putnam, was shown by someone who did his or her very best. She was as supportive and loving of people who did their best as she was of people who did the best. To the League and to California Cities, Helen Putnam defined excellence. The Award for Excellence is given in her memory.



The City of Perris' booth at the annual League of California Cities conference detailed the Enchanted Heights sewer project with pictures, videos and documents explaining each facet of the project.



Perris Assistant City Manager Ron Carr explains the Enchanted Heights project to one of the many visitors who stopped by the City's booth.



The City's contingent at the annual League of California Cities conference included City Clerk Judy Haughney; consultant Maria Elena Kennedy (both seated); Perris City Councilwoman Joanne Evans' Administrative Assistant Tammy Blanco; City Manager Richard Belmudez (second row); Mayor Pro-Tem Al Landers; Mayor Daryl Busch and City Councilman Mark Yarbrough.



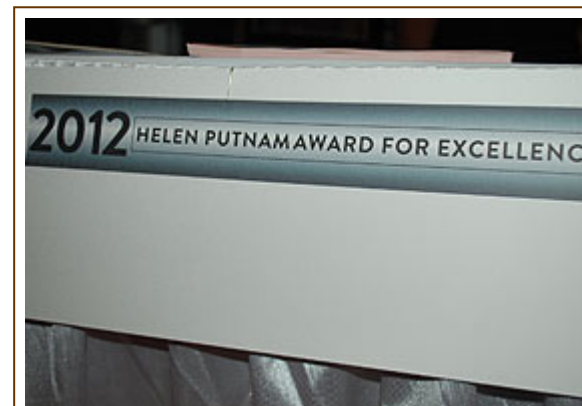
Perris Mayor Pro-Tem Al Landers talks to a recycling-encouraging robot at the League of California Cities conference.



Perris City Councilwoman Rita Rogers speaks to a vendor at the annual League of California Cities conference in San Diego.



Perris Mayor Daryl Busch with a vendor at the annual League of California Cities conference.



The sign says it all: Perris wins the top award from the League of California Cities, its second win since 2008.