



Perris Press Release

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Enchanted Heights Outreach Featured at Conference

The City of Perris took its Enchanted Heights outreach program on the road Tuesday, explaining to regional, state and federal water experts that communication and respect are the keys to obtaining the community support necessary to bring life-changing projects to reality.

The venue was a conference of water experts who were very interested in learning how the City of Perris successfully gained Enchanted Heights support for a three-year, \$13 million project that will replace septic tanks with sewers in the 446-home community.

Perris officials have for months worked with residents in Enchanted Heights, a disadvantaged community on the City's west end, on the need to replace aging septic systems with modern sewers.

The effort has included several community meetings, both formal and informal, conversations with dozens of residences and English and Spanish-language videos and press releases explaining the need for a new system.

Enchanted Heights began as a resort community about 50 years ago.

But over the decades, families have replaced to singles and couples who lived there originally. The result has been a large increase in population which has caused the septic systems to overflow, creating potential health risks.

Perris officials have for more than a decade known about the challenges facing Enchanted Heights residents and have worked to bring them relief.

Earlier this year, the City partnered with Eastern Municipal Water District, the County of Riverside, the California Department of Public Health and the State Water Resources Board to make the sewer project happen.

A big part of that plan was a concerted community outreach program.

The City hired Maria Elena Kennedy, a well-respected water expert familiar with navigating the state regulatory and funding agencies to spearhead the effort. She began a series of one-on-one and small group meetings that eventually drew dozens of residents. Those informal meetings also were attended by City Manager Richard Belmudez and Assistant City Manager Ron Carr, who answered questions and addressed resident concerns in detail.

A pair of community-wide meetings brought out hundreds of residents, who overwhelmingly supported the sewer program. A series of press releases and a public service announcement video further explained the need for the project, as Enchanted Heights residents related personal accounts about their concerns with the septic system and their support for the upgrades.

Construction on the massive project is expected to break ground later this summer.

"You have to gain peoples' trust," Kennedy told the gathering of more than 100 participants. "Once you gain their trust, they will become your partners and your project will be successful. You need to show you really care about them as people, not just a census tract. Talk to people. It pays."

Kennedy said that in the case of Enchanted Heights, communication in Spanish was absolutely necessary as the community is mostly Latino. She said that after many weeks of walking the community, Enchanted Heights residents began treating her as a friend. Eventually, residents began handing out fliers about upcoming community events about the sewer project and developed their own network to keep the neighborhood informed and updated on the latest developments.

"I spend time in peoples' homes, they know me," Kennedy said, "People who live in disadvantaged communities want to be engaged."

Kennedy also urged the conference attendees to take advantage of social networking programs like facebook, twitter and tumblr.

"It's the way young people communicate," she said. "They will tell their parents. It's a way of staying engaged with your disadvantaged community."

Kennedy's presentation was well received by the audience.

Ron Sullivan, an Eastern Municipal Water District Board Member, said the City, county and EMWD showed patience and tenacity in obtaining the funds for the Enchanted Heights project. The partners spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in preliminary engineering and environmental analyses. The application process took years, he said.

"It takes a commitment," he said. "It took a lot of diligence, a lot of time and a lot of commitment. Eastern, the City of Perris and their partners had the will to see this project through and it will be a huge benefit to the people of Enchanted Heights."

Celeste Cantu, general manager for the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, said Perris deserves praise for its outreach in Enchanted Heights. Enchanted Heights lies within the Santa Ana Watershed, Cantu said, and like other disadvantaged communities, it faces challenges of infrastructure and finances.

"It takes a tremendous amount of energy to make a project like Enchanted Heights happen," Cantu said. "It is a very trying task. Kudos to the City of Perris and its partners. They are going to get this project done. They deserve an A for their efforts."

Cantu said other agencies would do well to copy the City's comprehensive outreach efforts when they undertake major projects in disadvantaged communities.

Tuesday's conference, titled "Developing Funding for Disadvantaged Community Funding Projects," was sponsored by Fresno State University. It featured representatives from regional water districts, state agencies, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the United States Department of Agriculture and community activists.

CSU Press Release: [Water Officials, Researchers, Advocates at CSU Conference Address Solutions – and Funding – to Fix Water Systems in Poorer Neighborhoods](#)

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Celeste Cantu, general manager for the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, says Perris deserves great credit for developing a successful outreach strategy.



Maria Elena Kennedy, a Perris consultant to the Enchanted Heights Sewer Project, discusses how the City conducted its community outreach program to build citizen support for the project.