



Home > City Hall > Press Releases

Perris Receives \$100,000 Grant to Develop New Community Gardens



Conference of Mayor's Grant promo
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Media Contact

Joe Vargo
Public Information Officer
951-943-6100
jvargo@cityofperris.org



During an awards ceremony Jan. 25 in Washington D.C., Perris Mayor Michael Vargas (center) stands with Tom Cochran, CEO and Executive Director of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, Mitch Landrieu, Mayor of New Orleans and current President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, Susan Neely, president of the American Beverage Foundation for a Healthy America Board of Directors and president and CEO of the American Beverage Association and Steve Benjamin, Mayor of Columbia, South Carolina and current Vice President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. The City received a \$100,000 grant to continue developing 30 community gardens from one end of Perris to the other.

The City of Perris has received a \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the American Beverage Foundation for a Healthy America to continue its unprecedented efforts to establish 30 community gardens to fight obesity, diabetes and other life-threatening maladies.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas, Administrative Services Manager Isabel Carlos and Eduardo Sida picked up the award during a Conference of Mayors Meeting, January 25 in Washington D.C. Sida is Program Coordinator for Grow Perris, which includes the Perris Green City Farm Program and the Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenge.

The award elevates to a national stage the City's multi-pronged efforts to prevent disease through healthy eating and active living.

"It's a great honor and one that this City is most deserving of," Vargas said. "The City of Perris is committed to doing as much as it can to improve the lives and health of its residents. Other cities want to be committed as we are. It's good to be role model. We have to support this ongoing effort."

Praised poured in to the Perris team from Susan Neely, president of the American Beverage Foundation for a Healthy America Board of Directors and president and CEO of the American Beverage Association. She thanked the City for leading the way in promoting a healthy lifestyle for residents.

"America's beverage companies believe in the power of partnerships and the positive impact they can have on communities," Neely said. "The American Beverage Foundation for a Healthy America is proud to partner with the U.S. Conference of Mayors to support the great work of mayors like Mayor Vargas who are proactively tackling childhood obesity in creative ways."

The City's Green City Farm Program, begun in 2016, includes a Demonstration Farm featuring a wide assortment of environmentally friendly and innovative growing techniques, including aquaponic and hydroponic growing towers that use less water and fertilizer than traditional garden beds.

Since then, Perris has embarked on the Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenge to make fruits, vegetables and herbs available at no cost throughout all areas of the community via the creation and sustainability of 30 gardens.

"The Green City Farm/Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenge is an excellent example of an innovative program that inspires and encourages young people to maintain a balanced diet so they can reach their full potential," Neely continued. "Working together, government and industry can bring about lasting change not just to Perris but to communities across the nation."

Wide reaching effort/big results

The Green City Farm Program is an integral part of the ongoing Live Well Perris health initiative but it's by no means the only facet.

The Live Well Perris program includes evening "Witness to Fitness" workouts, a weekly senior walking club, the Chef-in-the-Garden and Chef-in-the-Classroom programs to teach residents and school children healthy cooking techniques, yoga sessions in the garden and special events like hikes, bike rides, an annual health fair and senior dance/prom.

Perris was one of the first cities in California to approve a healthy beverage ordinance requiring local restaurants to offer milk, water and/or 100 percent juice as the default beverage for kids' combo meals.

Much of the focus is geared toward preventing child diabetes and obesity. The Chef-in-the-Garden program has reached an estimated 10,000 elementary and middle-school children in the last three years.

"We're reaching out more and more to our young people to encourage them to eat healthy before they develop chronic health problems," Vargas said.



Eduardo Sida (center in green shirt) is Program Coordinator for Grow Perris, which includes the Perris Green City Farm Program and the Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenge, discusses growing techniques with school children during the recent New Year, New You, Be Better program in January.

Establishing garden spots

Before flying to Washington, Vargas and other City officials spoke at a videotaping in the City's Demonstration Garden on the City Hall Campus, where a crew from the U.S. Conference of Mayors was recording a public-service video about the Perris Green City Farm Program.

The taping drew more than 50 attendees, including City administrators, educators, public health professionals, representatives from City partners Eastern Municipal Water District, Kaiser Foundation Hospitals and the Southern California Association of Governments. Perris school children with an interest in growing healthy foods also attended.

Dubbed "New Year, New You, Be Better," the first of 2018, took place Jan. 3 to encourage Perris residents to kick off 2018 by recommitting to eat healthier and work up a sweat through regular exercise.

New Year, New You, Be Better drew more than 50 people, including school children, teachers, Master Gardeners from the University of California and representatives from the Riverside County Department of Public Health. A dozen students from May Ranch Elementary School harvested romaine lettuce from the aqua and hydroponic growing towers.

Chef-in-the-Classroom Lee Burton was on hand, preparing fruit kabobs and strawberry and cucumber infused water. Visitors munched popcorn flavored with almonds and cranberries—not butter and salt. A yoga-in-the-garden class helped interested visitors get in a workout.

Perris administrators and elected representatives are working with schools, church groups, civic and neighborhood associations and non-profits to create 30 gardens from one end of the City to the other. The ultimate goal is to make sure no Perris resident has to travel more than one-half mile to enjoy fresh produce.

To date, the City's Nutrition Education Obesity Prevention (NEOP) team has established gardens at Columbia Elementary School, May Ranch Elementary School, Triple Crown Elementary School, Pinacate Middle School and Heritage High School. In addition the NEOP team has contacted 16 other churches, schools and a museum as possible future garden locations.

Grateful for the recognition

City Councilwoman Tonya Burke also attended the New Year New You event.

She's kicked off 2018 by emphasizing the importance of adding fruit and losing sugary soft drinks in her diet. She's added berries—strawberries and blueberries—and nixed soda, chips and cookies. The result: a loss of 11 pounds in just a few weeks. She also took part in the yoga session.

"It's always great to be part of an event where the emphasis is on living well," Burke said. "The garden is a great addition to our City. It's another great opportunity Perris has embarked upon. We're always leading the charge and setting the pace for other cities to follow."

City Councilman Malcolm Corona, the father of a two-year-old son, said the grant shows Perris has reached the national stage in promoting healthy living—and is earning the recognition and respect from important players.

"We're being recognized for our efforts in promoting a healthy environment to encourage our residents—particularly our young residents—to live a healthier lifestyle," Corona said. "We are leading the charge to creating healthier residents through the awareness of the dangers of unhealthy eating."

City Councilman David Starr Rabb hailed the Green City Farm Program and healthiest cities initiative as a "good positive thing that promotes exercise and a healthier diet."



Program Coordinator Crystal Lopez instructs May Ranch Elementary 5th Grader, Samuel Sapiro, about making popcorn a fun and healthy snack.

"We're making progress," he said. "It's a great program and we're getting residents to make a commitment to improve their lives."

City Councilwoman Rita Rogers, a grandmother and great-grandmother of nine, said teaching healthy eating habits to children helps ensure they avoid a lifetime of woes caused by diabetes and obesity.

"Our green garden and Chef-in-the-Classroom program are so important because they present children with the information to prevent obesity and make healthy food choices," Rogers said. "I am so grateful to the American Beverage Foundation and the U.S. Conference of Mayors for recognizing the City of Perris. They realize we are on the forefront to improve lives by providing children the vital information they need to make the right food choices."

A 'revolutionary' approach

Revolutionary who spreads the word about healthy eating with communities throughout Southern California, said Perris' commitment is well ahead of every other City. From the Green City Farm Program and the demo garden at City Hall to the satellite gardens to the classroom demonstrations, exercise sessions and community walks and hikes, Perris is lapping the field in its commitment to healthy living.

"It's revolutionary," Burton said. "It's exciting to me to see how people get excited about eating healthy," Burton said. "I've never seen anything like it. It's easy to get kids excited and they get their parents excited. It's a model for everyone."

Gayle Hoxter, a supervisor for the Riverside County Department of Public Health, said the Perris Green City Farm Program is one of the largest and most extensive in the country.

"Perris is a community of action that is getting results," she said. "The City's commitment to Live Well Perris program is promoting health and wellness."

Kids' play

May Ranch Elementary School teacher Kelli Hague and about a dozen of her students turned out for the New Year New You festivities, where they harvested kale, lettuce, celery, spinach and strawberries. The school recently began its own community garden as part of the Green City Farm Program.

"I could not be more pleased with the City of Perris and its support for children and healthy eating through its community garden program," Hague said. "The City of Perris is phenomenal. It's a great group of people."

Taylor Valenzuela spent part of her 11th birthday at the garden. The May Ranch student took part in a City-sponsored course and earned the title of Junior Master Gardener.

"I enjoy learning about health and healthy activities," Taylor said. "Healthy food and drinks encourage people to become more health conscious."

Another young green thumb, seventh-grader Samantha Alfaro from Lakeside Middle School, said gardening increases her knowledge of the environment and how food makes its way from garden to plate. Samantha said she was happy to begin 2018 by harvesting healthy foods and working with fellow students.

"It's nice to see a community all working together," she said.



Perris City Hall
101 N.D Street
Perris, CA 92570

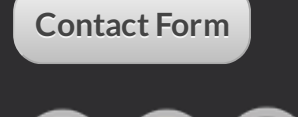
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