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Perris High School Celebrates the Opening of its New Community Garden



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas cuts the ribbon on the "Panther Patch" community garden at Perris High School. Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona stands to the Mayor's left. At far left is Perris City Manager Richard Belmudez.

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Perris elected officials and administrators joined educators at the grand opening of a community garden which municipal leaders and educators say catapults the 130-year-old Perris High School into the forefront of ongoing efforts to encourage healthy eating and active living.

Equally important as the opening of the City's sixth community garden was the unveiling of the Parent Engagement Center where moms and dads can study English, citizenship, computer science and other courses and learn about the latest events at the school and community.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas, Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona and City Manager Richard Belmudez were among the City dignitaries who cut the ribbon Feb. 13 on the "Panther Patch" garden, named in honor of the Perris High School mascot.

"This is a great day on two fronts," Vargas said. "We've got another community garden and the Parent Engagement Center. We will be enriching parents through educational classes and students with our community garden. It's a very exciting day for the City of Perris."

The City recently received a \$100,000 grant to develop 30 community gardens and is in the process of working with schools, non-profits, faith-based and community groups to complete that task. The ultimate goal: bring fresh fruits, vegetables, spices and herbs to within a half-mile of every Perris resident.

Perris High School becomes the sixth campus to create and support a community garden, following Columbia Elementary School, May Ranch Elementary School, Triple Crown Elementary School, Pinacate Middle School and Heritage High School. The Panther Patch includes cilantro, chives, catnip, peppermint, onions, lettuce, tomatoes, hybrid peppers and citrus trees.

Vargas thanked several Perris staff members for their outstanding efforts to reach the ultimate goal of 30 community gardens. Those included Garden Coordinator Eduardo Sida, Temporary Garden Program Assistants Maria Marquez and Lynnley Huey, Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention (NEOP) Coordinators Crystal Lopez and Armando Panchi and Temporary NEOP Program Assistant Martin Martinez.

"They are the backbone of this effort," Vargas said. "Without their hard work, none of this would happen. They need to be acknowledged and appreciated."



Perris Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona and Mayor Michael Vargas present a City Proclamation to Perris High School Principal Juan Santos during the Feb. 13 unveiling of the community garden at the high school.

The event also held special significance for Corona, a 2003 Perris High graduate and current math teacher. The site of the Family Engagement Center was formerly a child care center where he attended classes as a pre-schooler.

Inspiring students, helping families

Corona said the Perris and Heritage high school gardens mean many City students can now plant, nourish and harvest produce from grades K-12. They'll learn biology and horticulture, he said, but more importantly the gardens will inspire students to live healthier lives and develop a lifetime interest in acquiring and using knowledge.

"Gardens have inspired some of our greatest writers and scientists throughout history," Corona said, noting that Isaac Newton developed his laws of gravity when he observed an apple falling in a garden. "Great things are happening in the City of Perris and I expect that will continue."

Perris High School English teacher Heather Avila worked with City staff to develop the campus garden. Avila graduated from Perris High in 1991 and has lived in the Community since 1976, when the City boundary ended at Nuevo Road and Perris High School students could look across the street and see alfalfa fields and watermelon patches.

"Perris High School has been the center of the universe in this City," Avila said.

The community has changed dramatically since then, increasing from about 5,000 residents to nearly 75,000 today. Many working class families struggle to purchase healthy food options like fruits and vegetables, Avila said. She expects the Panther Patch will prove a big hit with them.



Perris High School teacher Heather Avila says fruits and vegetables growing at the campus community garden will be distributed to disadvantaged families.

"We always do a food drive for the holidays," she said. "This year, we will be able to give our residents fresh fruits and vegetables."

Students eager, excited

Principal Juan Santos said the garden will improve the diets of students, parents and the entire Panther community.

"Healthy living is important," Santos said. "It is important to work with the City of Perris to see projects like this come to fruition. Our garden lets students know they can grow food. Hopefully they will be able to grow some fruits and vegetables at home."

Agricultural teacher Aaron Nering said Perris high students have taken an active part of building and maintaining the garden since it began.

Green-thumb teen-agers built the planter boxes, installed the irrigation system and lighting equipment, learned proper planting techniques and will harvest the ripe produce.

"Our students are a big part of the garden's success," Nering said. "They are very excited to help."



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