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Recent Economic Strategy Meetings a Big Hit with Perris Residents



Grace Williams, the City of Perris Planning and Economic Development Director, addresses the crowd during one of two public-input meetings to discuss long-term economic development strategy in the City.

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Perris planners asked residents, business owners, high-school students and their parents to come up with a list of attractions and enterprises that would spur economic development in the City over the next 20 years.

They received plenty.

How about a hotel and casino along Ramona Expressway? Or a multi-purpose trail alongside Interstate 215? Or a science museum, bowling alley or roller rink in Central Perris? Or an organic farm in Downtown Perris to produce healthy fruits and vegetables. Gourmet burger joints, a medical center, a mall with an anchor like Target or a movie theater, arcades for teens and young adults, sit-down restaurants, public art projects and a community swimming pool also made the wish list.

The second of two public comment sessions wrapped up Feb. 20 at the City Council Chambers. An earlier meeting took place Feb. 15. Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and City Councilmembers Tonya Burke, David Starr Rabb and Rita Rogers attended one or both sessions. About 70 residents attended at least one session.

Grace Williams, the City's Planning and Economic Development Director, said the wish list will be summarized and presented soon to the Perris City Council. Staff then will develop a "road map" to bring at least some of the ideas to reality.

"Thank you for your input," Williams said following the conclusion of the second meeting. "You presented us with a lot of really great ideas."

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats

Part of each long-range strategy session included an analysis of the City's pluses and minuses and how those could affect economic development in the next five, 10 or 20 years.

Perris possesses a number of strengths—plenty of open space, affordable housing, world-class recreational activities, a rich history encompassing three centuries, central location in Inland Southern California, access to freeways, airports and Metrolink and a nationally recognized commitment to healthy eating and active living.

Weaknesses include economically and educationally challenged areas of the City that lose out to more affluent areas in business attraction.

Opportunities include the chance to bolster Perris's appeal by bringing additional retail, restaurant and entertainment venues to the City. Threats include failing to take advantage of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities (like the 2028 Olympic events scheduled for Lake Perris) or the wrong types of development that destroy the small-town charm that attracts and keeps many City residents.

Mayor Vargas said elected officials and City economic development specialists are working hard to attract more retail stores, restaurants and recreational venues.

Perris elected officials and administrators have attended the International Shopping Center Conference more than once, met with representatives of major retail centers and restaurants, received positive feedback and even tentative agreements to locate in Perris only to be withdrawn at a later time.

But outreach and marketing efforts are continuing and will produce results in the coming months, City officials say.

On the same page

"We're on the same page," Vargas said. "It's important to gauge the sentiments of our residents. It's important to hear the feedback."



Members of the Perris Youth Advisory Committee prepare display material before a public hearing to discuss the City's long-term economic strategy.

City Councilwoman Tonya Burke said Perris must be cautious as it develops. She's heard from constituents concerned that Perris will become gentrified by multitudes of people moving in and displacing long-established neighborhoods with seas of red-tile roofed residences. In the process, they tell Burke, the City's small-town down home vibe will be gone forever.

"We need to move forward with smart growth," Burke said. "We don't want to destroy the small-town charm and character that makes Perris, Perris."

Burke said public comments made during the pair of meetings reinforce that Perris residents, elected officials, administrators and planners "share the same thoughts" about long-range development.

"These meetings allow the community to be involved in the process," she said.

Rabb called the public's comments "very productive" and said he appreciated many members of the City's Youth Advisory Committee, their parents and other residents and business owners who turned out and voice their input.

Rabb said the City has attracted major businesses like Wayfair as well as smaller restaurant chains like Corky's Kitchen and Bakery. More will come, he said. It's inevitable.

"The things that people are wanting will be coming to Perris," Rabb said.

Rogers said City staff and elected representatives will return to the shopping center conference in May to once again pitch Perris as a great place to locate and thrive. She said she appreciates the comments from people attending the workshops.

Rogers said eateries like Waba Grill, Jimmy John's, Pieology Pizzeria, Chipotle Mexican Grill and Panda Express have opened locations in Perris and are doing well. More restaurants will follow.

"We have been working diligently to bring more restaurants and retail to Perris," Rogers said. "The synergy is coming."

Time is ticking

Several residents and business owners spoke of the need for Perris to be ready when the next wave of new businesses and residents get ready to move in.

The 2028 Olympics will put the City on the world map as elite athletes from all over the globe descend on Lake Perris to take part in a variety of water sports. Easy road access to and from the venue, plus hotels, restaurants and entertainment venues are vital if Lake Perris—and the City—will reap the benefits of universal goodwill from happy visitors.

Eider Vazquez has lived in Perris for 20 years and loves the community. He knows his neighbors, he's established roots in Perris, his neighborhood is quiet, he feels safe. But when his kids want to see a movie or he wants to take his family out to eat, it's usually outside of the City. Vazquez said he would like to see a nice shopping center anchored by a Target and a movie theatre. More restaurant selection would be good too.

Vazquez said he would like to see some of the City's open spaces filled in.

"People see open spaces when they drive along the freeway, they drive on," he said.

Jose and Lizette Herrera voiced similar suggestions and added they would like to see more banks in the City. Overall, they were pleased the City sought, and will act upon, public input.

"The engagement was pretty good," Jose Herrera said. "The City knows we're here. It's time to act."

Gary Gosliga, airport director at the March Joint Powers Authority, said he's convinced it's only a matter of time before Perris boasts restaurants, retail, entertainment and cultural attractions. The City's affordable land means more residents in more homes. Rooftops equal retail. Housing also means more jobs stay local.

"We've got to be prepared for the train that's coming," he said.



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