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Perris Receives \$100,000 Grant for New Community Gardens



Perris Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona, City Councilwoman Tonya Burke, Mayor Michael Vargas and City Councilman David Starr Rabb with the silver bowl presented to the City to honor its commitment to improving the nutrition options for Perris residents.

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The City of Perris took center stage on a national stage April 21 as elected representatives and top administrators accepted a \$100,000 award for creating a system of 30 community gardens to promote healthy eating options for its residents.

Former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin headed the list of dignitaries who spoke at the ceremony in the Perris Green City Farm Program (the official name of the community garden), praising Perris for its commitment, innovation and leadership in results in battling illness resulting from poor diets.

Franklin representing the U.S. Conference of Mayors, which along with the American Beverage Foundation for a Healthy America announced in January that Perris had won the 2018 Childhood Obesity Prevention Award for its community-gardens initiative.

Perris is partnering with schools, community groups, faith-based organizations, the Western Riverside Council of Governments (WRCOG) and Eastern Municipal Water District to eliminate "food deserts" by ensuring that no one has to travel more than half-a-mile to obtain fruits, vegetables, spices and herbs from one of the City-wide community gardens.

The City and its partners have opened six community gardens so far and are in various stages of development on another 12.

"The City of Perris is a leader in urban gardening," Franklin said. "Please spread the word across America that great things happen when you collaborate, find great partners and never give up!"

Michael Osur, the Deputy Director of the Riverside County Department of Public Health, said Perris' commitment means residents will live longer, healthier lives. The department to date has donated \$1.5 million to support the Perris community-gardens program.

"You're what we dream about," Osur said. "Perris has become the model for community gardening and community engagement. We want healthy eating."

Grateful, and determined



Former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, representing the U.S. Conference of Mayors, addresses the audience gathered April 21 at the Perris Green City Farm Program: "The City of Perris is a leader in urban gardening...Great things happen when you collaborate, find great partners and never give up!"

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas, Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona, City Councilmembers Tonya Burke and David Starr Rabb and City Manager Richard Belmudez accepted the monetary award on behalf of the City.

As a further memento of the award, the City also received a large silver bowl from the Mayors' Conference and the American Beverage Association.

Belmudez noted that the national recognition took place five years to the day of the City's initial health fair, which kicked off the ongoing "Live Well Perris" healthy-eating active-living campaign. Live Well Perris, in addition to the Perris Green City Farm Program also includes a yearly health fair, City-sponsored workouts and boot camp, hikes, bicycle rides, a senior walking program and Senior Prom.

The secret to success? "We have a very ambitious staff who took on the challenge," Belmudez said.

Vargas said the City is determined to continue its fight against obesity, diabetes, high-blood pressure and other maladies linked to poor nutrition. Vargas has attended the opening of every community garden.

"We are committed to expanding our health equity in this City," he said. "Our 30 community gardens are the catalyst to creating a healthier community. This program has been regionally embraced and regionally impactful. We are forever grateful to our partners."

Transforming nutrition education

Corona said he is pleased that elementary, middle and high-school students play a major part in planting, nurturing and harvesting produce grown at gardens where they attend class. Corona teaches at Perris High School, the site of one community garden.



Perris City Manager Richard Belmudez said the success of the Green City Farm Program lies with the City staff who took on and met the challenge to improve lives through better nutrition.

"Students are taking on leadership roles," he said. "This program has transformed the way we teach nutrition education."

Burke said the success of the community gardens and the City's overall commitment to health and exercise lies on several "pillars"—Perris' leadership, its public-private partnerships and community inclusion.

"We have become a replicable model," she said. "Through this garden, the City has planted the seed of inspiration. We are transforming the City's health culture."

Rabb noted that agriculture provided the seed for the creation of Perris more than 130 years ago, when farmers came to the community to plant potatoes, alfalfa and grain crops. Now, thanks to the Perris Green City Farm Program and its satellite gardens, farming once again has taken root in the City.

The urban gardening initiative, Rabb said, "will spur social, educational economic opportunities in Perris."

"We are creating opportunities for business and workforce development," he said. "Today, agriculture continues to be at the heart of Perris."

Other speakers included Ron Sullivan, a member of the EMWD board of directors; Andrea Howard, Program Manager for Special Projects for the Western Riverside Council of Governments; Nick Buro, representing the American Beverage Association and Crystal Swann, representing the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Also recognized was Eduardo Sida, the program coordinator who wrote the grant that resulted in the City's receiving the \$100,000 grant.



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