



home > city hall > press releases

Perris Bids Farewell to Councilwoman Tonya Burke



Outgoing Perris City Councilwoman Tonya Burke was presented with several awards during a recent City Council meeting. With her are City Councilman David Starr Rabb, City Councilwoman Rita Rogers and Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona.

Perris City Councilwoman Tonya Burke has ended her tenure as a public representative, leaving a legacy that emphasized values she brought when she successfully ran for office in 2014—faith, families and children, education, employment and healthy living through diet and exercise.

Mrs. Burke left the dais for the final time Dec. 11 as newly elected and re-elected City Councilmembers were sworn into office.

The City Council had previously honored Mrs. Burke at an earlier meeting, presenting her with several awards and commending her for the determination, commitment and passion she brought to Perris.

Mrs. Burke fought back tears as she addressed her colleagues and Perris residents, telling them that she took "great pride in serving our City" and calling her time as an elected official "an absolute honor."

"I have so much love for this City," she said. "Even though I will no longer be up here to represent you, I will remain on the ground fighting for our City."

Praise from colleagues

Mayor Michael Vargas and fellow City Councilmembers lavished praise on Mrs. Burke, saying her commitment raised Perris' profile and inspired others to take pride in the community.

"I wish you well," he said. "Anything you do will be a success. Good luck on your future endeavors."

Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona for her diligence in bringing programs and facilities to improve the health and quality of life for all of Perris. He cited the Perris Green City Farm Program which will create community gardens through the community, the job-skills center slated to come to Perris in the near future and the recent opening of a fitness court at Paragon Park as some examples of Burke's health-related initiatives.

"Our City is better because you have served," Vargas said.

City Councilman David Starr Rabb said serving with Burke was "an honor and a pleasure."

"You are an honest and humble person," Rabb said. "You kept your faith in God. We sometimes disagreed but it was never personal. You are a calming influence. It was an honor and blessing to serve with you."

City Councilwoman Rita Rogers said Burke achieved all her goals as an elected representative—including access for residents to better paying and higher-skilled jobs, safe and well-maintained streets and neighborhood.

"You had a vision and a plan," Rogers said. "You are beacon, a shining light."

Children, schools, education

Mrs. Burke's concern for Perris families, especially children, became evident on many occasions during her time on the City Council. Her job working with at-risk youth as a vocational counselor at the California Department of Rehabilitation created the passion to fight on behalf of children and teen-agers.

On numerous occasions from the City Council dais, she informed students about available education scholarships and urged them to apply.

She launched the City's "Job Shadow Day," which put Perris teen-agers in direct contact with business owners and workers, allowing the youngsters to see real-world work situations and the skills needed to handle them.

At the start of every Job Shadow Day, Burke addressed the students, urging them to ask questions, pick up business cards, get telephone numbers and remain in contact with potential employers.



Perris City Councilwoman Tonya Burke poses for a photo as she leaves the City Council Chambers Dec. 11 at the end of her four-year term.

Each July, Mrs. Burke and other volunteers handed out hundreds of backpacks and other school supplies to Perris school kids, ensuring they would have the necessary materials to begin their school year.

She took part on several occasions in the International Walk to School Day, leading hundreds of kids through Perris neighborhoods to their campus and then speaking to many about the importance of education.

She also took part in the annual "Read across America" program, honoring Dr. Seuss—reading various classics to groups of students and emphasizing the importance of reading to learning and to life. She also spoke to older students about the need for civic engagement and the importance of staying abreast of issues important to the Perris community.

On multiple occasions, Mrs. Burke served as Principal for a Day at Orange Vista High School.

From struggles to success

Painful experience taught Mrs. Burke the importance of exercise and healthy eating.

She battled with her weight and when her doctor said she would likely need knee replacements if she didn't get in better shape, she took the warning to heart.

She began a vigorous exercise program, became a Zumba instructor and lost more than 150 pounds. Her personal struggle with obesity helped create in Mrs. Burke a fierce determination to preach about exercising and proper nutrition and she became and remains a staunch supporter of the City's Live Well Perris healthy-eating active-living campaign.

Mrs. Burke was not afraid to lead by example in other areas as well.

She overcame her fear of heights to put on a safety harness and install solar panels on a two-story home as part of a City Council led community improvement day. Leading by example and to show that women can handle any sort of job, Mrs. Burke's labor inspired the all-female ground crew--teen-agers the Perris Youth Advisory Committee—who supported the project from terra firma.

Mrs. Burke also cited several other accomplishments in her farewell address. Those include the creation of a City application to allow residents to notify municipal staff of potential problems like potholes on Perris streets. She hosted a Small Business Summit, worked with Mt. San Jacinto College to bring higher-education courses to Perris, and supported the Perris Civic Scholars program to provide a no-cost bachelor's degree to qualified applicants and the First State-of-the-City address.

Her contributions did not go unnoticed by national organizations.

In 2016, Mrs. Burke received the NAACP's "Friend of Labor Award" in a ceremony at the Riverside Convention Center. She earned the award for her willingness to listen to and support the concerns of unions and labor organizers. As she left office, she was honored by State Assemblyman Jose Medina and State Sen. Richard Roth and U.S. Rep. Mark Takano for her contributions to Perris.

Faith and the future

Mrs. Burke did not shy away from her deep religious convictions.

She is a member of Cross Word Christian Church. From the moment she was sworn into office in December 2014, Mrs. Burke was strident in her faith and the role it played in her personal and family life and politics.

"I cannot start my duties without giving praise and honor to Jesus Christ," Mrs. Burke said in her first public comments after she took the oath of office. "It was God who sent me here. Everything happens for a reason."

As she begins the next chapter of her life, Mrs. Burke acknowledged the times serving the City caused her to miss out on important family activities. She and her husband, Jason are the parents of three children—Devon, 24; Brianna, 21, and Jaylyn, 16.

"I've missed a lot of basketball, drill team and color guard performances," she said. "My next venture is a commitment to family."

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