



home > city hall > press releases

Council Approves Healthy Drink Ordinance

Perris became the first city in Southern California to approve an ordinance making 100-percent juice, water or milk the “default” beverages” in kids’ meals sold at community restaurants.

The Perris City Council on March 14 unanimously approved the ordinance as a way to combat obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol in children caused by sugary sodas and soft drinks, which pose major health risks to thousands of children in the community and Riverside County.

Perris becomes just the third city in California to pass a “default beverage ordinance,” following the leads of Northern California cities Stockton and Davis.

The ordinance requires restaurants that serve kids meals to provide milk, non-dairy milk, water, sparkling water or 100 percent juice as the default beverage option. Customers will still be able to purchase sodas and other sugary drinks on request.

The cities of Chula Vista and Hawthorne have approved proclamations, but not official ordinances, in support of default drink choices.

The City Council actions marks the latest step in Perris’ efforts to improve the lives of its residents through its “Live Well Perris” healthy-eating, active-living campaign.

Begun in 2013, the effort includes an annual health fair and since its inception has featured dozens of walks and hikes, workouts in Perris parks, construction of new play areas, the creation of a community garden and a “chef in the classroom” program to teach elementary school kids the value of choosing fruits, vegetables and water over chips, cookies and soft drinks. Thousands of Perris residents have benefitted from one or more of those exercise and nutrition programs.

Changing the culture

Alfred Mata, Public Health Advocate Program Manager for the non-profit agency Public Health Advocates, said the council’s vote reinforces the City’s commitment to change the culture in Perris to emphasize healthy living.

“The healthy choice should be the first choice,” Mata said. “Perris is taking the lead in California on promoting a real culture change—this City is serious about changing the culture to emphasize and support healthy living.”

Riverside County’s Public Health Officer voiced similar sentiments.

“We’re proud to support the City of Perris in this effort,” said Dr. Cameron Kaiser. “Empty calories from sugary drinks increase everybody’s risk of obesity and diabetes, kids and adults included. Now families can get healthier drink choices, and that really makes a big difference.”

The healthy drink ordinance is urgently needed, public health experts agree.

The rate of obesity has tripled from 5 percent of the population in the 1970s to 15 percent today. An estimated 40 percent of Perris youth and adolescents are obese, which leads to increase incidences of diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. More than half of Californians--55 percent--have pre-diabetes or diabetes, while 69 percent are overweight and at a higher risk of developing diabetes in the future. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that one-in-three children born today will have diabetes by 2050.

Recently compiled data shows 47 percent of children in Riverside County consume at least one sugary drink every day. Adolescents consume 39 pounds of sugar each year from sugary drinks.

Educating the public

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and his City Council colleagues showered universal praise on the healthy drink ordinance. Vargas said the ordinance sends the message to Perris residents that “we practice what we preach.”

“I absolutely support this ordinance,” Vargas said. “It’s all about Live Well Perris. I believe this is a great way to educate our youngsters about eating healthy.”

Mayor Pro Tem David Starr Rabb noted that large sodas served for as little as \$1 at some fast food eateries can contain 500 or more calories. Consuming sodas ballooned his weight to 199 pounds about 15 years ago. Better nutrition choices and regular workouts help keep his current weight at 158 pounds.

“Over the course of the last dozen years we’ve recognized the impact of sugary drinks on health,” Rabb said. “It’s important to start kids young so they make healthy eating decisions. It’s a passion of mine.”

City Councilwoman Tonya Burke said she and other members of her family have grappled with obesity and related health problems. She attributed Zumba and better eating choices with helping her lose weight. The City’s Live Well Perris program and community-garden at City Hall reaffirms its commitment to healthy eating and exercise, Burke said.

“We are setting the standard in Riverside County and beyond,” Burke said, adding that approval of the default-drink ordinance “will make our City healthier.”

“It will affect our City for generations,” she said. “We are setting a new standard.”

City Councilman Malcolm Corona said he “is all for the healthy drink ordinance,” noting that parents still have the choice to choose soda when they go to a fast food restaurant.

“Sometimes people just need a little extra push,” Corona said. “This is a great starting point.”

City Councilwoman Rita Rogers said the healthy drink default ordinance “goes hand in hand” with the Live Well Perris program and its community garden.

“We are doing everything correctly by encouraging people to opt for the healthy drink choice,” Rogers said.

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