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Perris Wins Grant for Being among Healthiest Communities

The City of Perris has been named a finalist in a nationwide search to determine the healthiest community in America.

Perris has received a \$10,000 grant as its reward for being named one of 50 finalists in the HealthyCommunity50 challenge that is part of the Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenge. The Challenge began earlier this year and represents a partnership between the Aetna Foundation, the American Public Health Association and the National Association of Counties.

The City has committed to partnering with community, faith-based and school groups to create 30 community gardens in Perris to provide healthy eating choices in disadvantaged neighborhoods known as "food deserts."

Program Assistant Arcenio Ramirez said food deserts can negatively affect a person's health and lead to conditions like diabetes and high-cholesterol. Riverside County has a higher than average percentage of diabetes cases than the rest of California and Perris has a higher than average percentage than the rest of Riverside County.

"We are excited to kick off this program," Ramirez said. "We hope it will inspire Perris residents to live healthier by eating healthy produce and learning a little bit about gardening."

Program Assistants Armando Panchi, Crystal Lopez and Eduardo Sida are working with Ramirez on the City's community-wide garden project, which was announced earlier this month at a City Council meeting. Isabel Carlos, Assistant Director of Administrative Services, is supervising the project.



The team responsible for the success of the Perris Green City Farm Program: Program Assistant Arcenio Ramirez, Assistant Director of Administrative Services Isabel Carlos, City Manager Richard Belmudez and Program Assistants Armando Panchi, Crystal Lopez and Eduardo Sida.

The City already operates a community garden known officially as the "Perris Green City Farm Program" on its D Street campus and that location will serve as a model to inspire residents to begin their own plots, said program assistant Arcenio Ramirez.

The City has until September 2018 to complete the 30 community gardens and become eligible for the \$250,000 grand prize.

Other finalists in the competition have their own challenges to improve the lives of their residents through initiatives tailored to their specific needs. Hundreds of cities across America applied to be part of the challenge. The winning city will be announced in late 2018 and will take home the top prize of \$250,000.

Continuing Live Well initiative

The HealthyCommunity50 Challenge continues the City's "Live Well Perris" initiative, which began four years ago and has garnered national, state and regional honors. Live Well encourages residents to make healthier eating choices and maintain fitness through exercise, including City-sponsored events like bicycle rides, hikes and exercise classes.

Thousands of residents have taken part in nutrition and fitness programs since Live Well Perris began in 2013.

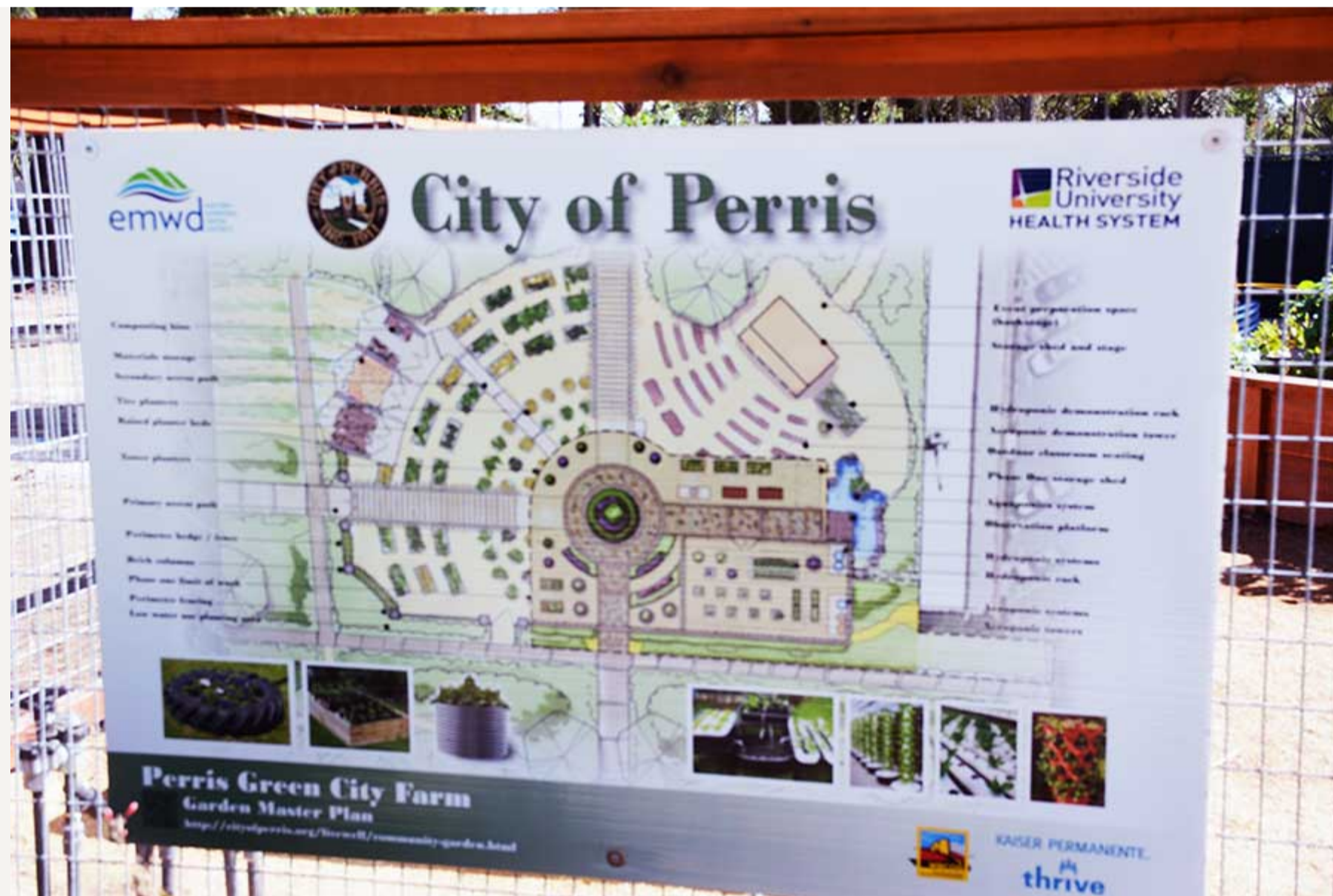
Earlier this year, the City opened its community garden, which uses a variety of high-yield, low-water growing techniques to produce lettuce, tomatoes, onions, corn, cilantro and various sorts of peppers.

The green city farm program has been hailed by representatives of several Riverside County communities as an innovative approach to providing healthy choices to Perris residents, including low-income and senior citizens who often struggle to balance food budgets with other living expenses. The garden also serves as a classroom for school-age children who learn first-hand from Chef Lee Burton.

As part of the HealthyCommunity50 Challenge, the City will designate that location as the "core hub" of the 31-garden program. Five locations at schools, community and faith-based organizations will be "satellite hub sites" and 25 other spots will be classified as "neighborhood sites." Volunteers would plant, maintain and harvest produce.

Ramirez said no satellite hub locations have been selected but the City has contacted representatives of Pincate Middle School, Innovative Horizons Charter School, Mead Valley Elementary School and the newly opened Clearwater Elementary School as possible choices.

When completed, the goal of the 30-garden project is to ensure that no resident travels more than half a mile to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables.



The City of Perris has received a \$10,000 grant to expand the Perris Green City Farm Program.

Leadership support

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch and his colleagues on the City Council voiced solid support for the City-wide gardens project. Busch was particularly pleased that schools are part of the mix, noting that Perris schools have in recent years operated gardens with great success.

"It's great when young people get introduced to growing food so they know where that food comes from," Busch said. "Too many people think that food comes from stores. Gardens are a great way to learn what it takes to get food to your table."

Mayor Pro Tem Rita Rogers said that as a grandmother and great-grandmother, she's concerned that youngsters learn healthy-eating options. And kids love to get their hands dirty planting seeds and watching them sprout "to see how things grow."

Rogers, who maintains close ties to many churches in Perris, said she would contact pastors as the community garden project moves ahead.

"Churches would like to be part of this program," she said. "I am very excited about it because it encourages healthy eating. I definitely think our residents will take ownership of this project and we will get the volunteers we need to make it a success."

City Councilwoman Tonya Burke said she was pleased to see the vision of the original garden expanded throughout Perris.

"The thought was that the community would see the success of the City garden and try to replicate that throughout our City," Burke said. "That vision is being implemented. It's good for the community to learn different methods of gardening and learn from it."

City Councilman David Starr Rabb said fruits and vegetables from the various community gardens could be used to supplement food items supplied by church and community-based pantries. He predicted that planting, tilling and harvesting the local plots will turn many Perris residents into enthusiastic amateur gardeners.

"A lot of people will learn how to grow their own food," Rabb said. "The City of Perris has been on the cutting edge in a lot of areas. It's willing to step up and try something new."

City Councilman Mark Yarbrough said he "loves the concept" of the community-wide garden because they can illustrate the importance of planting and harvesting healthy foods. Healthy eating, along with exercise, can reduce or eliminate some medical conditions like diabetes. Yarbrough credited the creativity of the City's municipal staff with innovative thinking that leads to innovative and well-received outreach programs.

"We're leading with programs that the community embraces," he said.

Information about the Perris HealthyCommunity50 Challenge will be updated periodically on the city's [website](#). To speak to one of the program assistants, call 951-943-6100, ext. 269.

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