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Praise for Perris at Forum



Lynda Barbour, a Southern California representative of the Cancer Action Network, talks to Perris Assistant City Manager Ron Carr during a meeting to find ways for communities to prioritize parks and recreation services.

The City of Perris took center stage during a Feb. 25 forum that featured national and state experts brainstorming about ways communities can prioritize parks and recreation services to promote exercise, healthy living and prevent debilitating illnesses.

The forum, the first of several sponsored by the California Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Cities Campaign, attracted recreation directors and advocates from Washington D.C., San Diego, Pico Rivera, Ontario, Riverside and elsewhere. A second HEAL Cities meeting is scheduled for Stockton in March. Two others will take place in May.

The HEAL Cities Campaign is sponsored by Kaiser Permanente. Partnering with the health-care giant is Oakland-based non-profit Change Lab Solutions, which works to provide community-based solutions to diseases like cancer, heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

This week's "listening session" included parks and recreation specialists, senior-citizen outreach coordinators, obesity prevention experts and nutrition and health advocates.

The 90-minute meeting emphasized possible methods nutrition and parks and recreation advocates could employ to convince elected officials that healthy eating and exercise contribute to the community's quality of life.

Perris was chosen to host the initial meeting because the City has opened new parks, embarked on a healthy eating campaign to encourage youngsters trade in sugary snacks for fruits and vegetables and has earned widespread acclaim for its "Live Well" programs, which has reached thousands of residents through health fairs, sports clinics, walks, hikes and aerobic workouts. New parks include Mercado Park in the disadvantaged Downtown Area, the Big League Dreams sports complex and the Drop Zone Aquatics Center.

Workshop participants were eager to learn how the City had accomplished so much, even during the Great Recession, which saw many other California communities slash their recreation budgets.

Ian McLaughlin, an attorney and program director for ChangeLab Solutions, served as moderator. He did not hide his enthusiasm for what Perris has accomplished.

"I am tremendously impressed, I had no idea about the extent of what this City has done for its residents," McLaughlin told Assistant City Manager Ron Carr. "It's remarkable."

Carr said the meeting provided "an interesting discussion that affirmed that Perris is at the forefront of providing healthy options for its residents."



Perris Administrative Services Manager Isabel Carlos address the Feb. 25 meeting of the Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Cities Campaign, which was held in the City Council Chambers.

Planning Commissioner Brady McCarron said Live Well has worked because the entire City, "from the Mayor to each department head to the City staff brought into it."

"Come to an event and everyone is there," he said. "That's what makes it a success. That's when people know the program works. The City sold the Live Well program to the public, who caught that wave of enthusiasm. It caught on like wildfire."

Perris officials said they use several methods to engage the public.

Those include working with youth sports league coaches and commissioners, young sports enthusiasts, personal contacts with community members, using the City's website and facebook pages and taking advantage of the Perris Youth Advisory Commission. When the City sought input about its new skateboard park that opened last year, it got in touch with skating enthusiasts to seek their ideas.

As part of its Live Well program, the City hired a chef to work directly with elementary school students to prepare healthy snacks. Some students were so impressed by the chef's classes they requested their school make the same healthy chick-pea recipe they concocted during one lesson, which prompted the school district to change its lunch program.

Representatives from the National Recreation and Parks Association made the trip from Washington D.C. to attend the meeting. So did the San Diego-based representative from the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network.

Travis Smith, who flew out from Washington for the meeting, summed up his reaction to the City's outreach program in one word: terrific.

"It's well thought out," he said. "It provides a well-integrated effort to provide healthy eating and living and recreational activities."

Lynda Barbour, regional representative for the Cancer Action Network, said the enthusiasm embraced by Perris representatives and staff "gives me chills."

"They are so passionately excited, I have never seen anything like it," Barbour said.

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch has stated repeatedly that the reason for all the City's success with its parks, recreation and Live Well program lies with the residents.

"A healthy City is a happy City," he said. "The people of Perris are the heroes for making our programs a success."

Media Contact

Joe Vargo
Public Information Officer
951-956-2120
jvargo@cityofperris.org



Perris City Hall
101 N. D Street
Perris, CA 92570

Hours: Mon. - Thurs. 8 am - 6pm
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