

City of Perris – Disadvantaged Community Outreach

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The City's Enchanted Heights project demonstrated how a creative approach to funding, along with an innovative outlook on public outreach, served to remedy a long-standing threat to a community's public health. Three local and two state agencies came together to collaborate on a \$15 million sewer construction project. Securing the funding was just the first step in this multi-jurisdictional endeavor. It soon became apparent that, as with many projects, there was in addition to financial considerations, a large human relations element to be managed. As such, the City of Perris took the lead in educating and communicating with the residents of the neighborhood. The result was an award winning project, recognized statewide for its unique methods in community outreach.

For several years, the community of Enchanted Heights on Perris' western boundary was besieged by failing septic tanks, which spewed raw sewage during rain events. It was not unusual to see children stepping carefully to avoid sewage in the streets on their way to school. Pools of contaminated water throughout the neighborhood served as breeding grounds for mosquitoes and other swarming insects, increasing the threat of disease and virus transmission.

Although the solution to this problem was obvious—build a sewer system—the funding proved elusive. The institutional barriers were also enormous: the majority of the residents did not speak English and were culturally isolated. These language barriers as well as technological barriers in the community made mainstream communications difficult. Realizing that most projects of this scope require a regional approach to be successful, the City partnered with the County of Riverside and Eastern Municipal Water District to apply for

\$15 million in funding from two state agencies; the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB). The funding sought was specifically set aside for Disadvantaged Communities. Still, convincing residents of the largely immigrant community to allow construction on their property proved more challenging than expected, as many residents were apprehensive of any government contact. Complicating matters even more, terms of the grant required the residents to sign a Right of Entry form, allowing access to their property. Initial resistance to this requirement was vocal and substantial. City staff could sense the opportunity for this project slipping away.

In response, the City decided that the best way to reach Enchanted Heights residents was through a face-to-face approach, one made at the personal level. It became apparent that communication needed to happen, less at City Hall, and more in the community. City staff started the outreach process by talking to individual residents in front of their homes. Soon after, the City Manager and the Assistant City Manager met on a Saturday morning with a large group of residents who had gathered in a homeowner's backyard. Conversations about the benefits of the project began to occur.

In the following weeks, City staff spent entire days walking the neighborhood distributing fliers in English and Spanish. Over time, staff members became familiar to Enchanted Heights residents. Enthusiasm for the project built gradually, but steadily. City Executive Staff organized forums at a community school; each was attended by hundreds of Enchanted Heights residents and were conducted in both Spanish and English. These forums proved invaluable to the City because they gave residents the opportunity to express their concerns. A separate web page on the City's website was created in both English and Spanish to augment and expand on previous outreach efforts. The City's Information Technology Division also produced video public service announcements in English and Spanish, which are now playing on the City's Channel 3 local access channel and on the City's website. The multi-pronged public outreach effort ended successfully with the majority of Enchanted Heights residents signing the Right of Entry forms allowing construction on their lots.

The project broke ground on August 22, 2011. It is expected to be completed in 2013. The City's public outreach efforts, in connection with this project, have been recognized throughout the state and have been featured in several workshops and training sessions concerning effective outreach to disadvantaged communities. The City also won the 2012 MMASC award for Organizational Excellence for its work on this project. ■