

## ~ Community Involvement ~

### Community Volunteers Step in with VERVE!

*This article is part of an on-going series highlighting innovative and promising practices that promote healthy aging. To learn more about how to make your community more aging-friendly, please see our publication, "A Healthy Community Perspective on Aging Well," available at [www.civicpartnerships.org](http://www.civicpartnerships.org).*

The City of Rio Vista (Solano County) has a total population of 7,525. The population grew over 58% between 2000 and 2007. The median age of residents in Rio Vista is 40.7 years, compared to the California median of 33.3 years. The city encompasses just under 8 square miles and is located on the banks of the Sacramento River, almost halfway between the cities of San Francisco and Sacramento.

In 2008, Rio Vista like many cities across the country experienced dramatic decreases in property and sales tax revenues due to steep declines in the housing market, rising unemployment and marked reductions in consumer spending. City leadership took steps to curb costs, including reductions in city staff, freezing salaries, dipping into reserves and leaving vacancies unfilled. Funding cuts also hit school districts and recreation programs, such as youth softball and baseball leagues. Cuts and reductions to public services are often more noticeable in smaller towns where resources are frequently stretched thin even in the "good" times. Older adults who live on fixed incomes are especially vulnerable to local economic woes and like most everyone, many are hit hardest in the area of housing costs.

The City Council expressed interest in attracting community volunteers (e.g., retirees) especially those who might have some business experience. In response, a few local residents developed a business plan for implementing a volunteer service

program and submitted their idea to the City Council. In an attempt to quell some council members' fears regarding lack of capacity to manage and coordinate a city-wide program, the program concept was outlined in a business plan and based on a temporary employment agency model. As needs arose within the city and community, the tasks would be posted on the program's web site in a job description format so that all potential community volunteers could review. In addition to large community-wide events, the web site prominently promotes local schools as primary volunteer locations. Thus, the volunteer organization known as Volunteers Enriching Rio Vista Environments (VERVE) was established in October 2008.

So far, two retired professionals are applying their skills in the development of economic stimulus grant proposals and have submitted three water district grant pre-applications to the State Water Board. By doing this, the City of Rio Vista will be put on a priority list for federal grants under the newly enacted American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Nearly \$7,000 has been saved as a result of the volunteer grant-writing efforts. Another project involves the replacement of a retaining wall and irrigation system located on the middle school grounds involving a local service organization and a school Parents' Club. VERVE is also currently recruiting for volunteer appraisers who can help appraise City owned property that may be sold in the future to raise revenue.


Even though everyone in the community was affected by the downturn, many residents, especially older adults, began to increase their volunteer activity and engagement in local youth and general city maintenance activities. According to City Treasurer Hale Conklin, "the City has saved over \$10,000/year in



Town entrance sign welcomes visitors to Rio Vista.

donated labor and materials as a result of local volunteers dedicated to maintaining the over 80 planter boxes and landscaping associated with the 'Welcome to Rio Vista' town entrance."

Community involvement or "civic engagement" is always at the forefront when considering ways to leverage dwindling resources. The beauty of volunteer service in the community is that it also provides meaning and purpose to those seeking a greater role in helping others in need, as well as enhancing the health and sense of well-being by those who volunteer.

Intergenerational activities that connect older adults and younger people produce multiple benefits, such as encouraging greater civic engagement which result in reduced isolation and loneliness; and helping to dispel negative "ageist" stereotypes often held by older people regarding younger people, and vice versa. 

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