

City of Rio Vista, California**Location:** Solano County**Population:** 4,571 (2000), 8,071 (2008 estimate)**Ethnic composition:** 83% White, 11% Hispanic or Latino**Median age:** 40.7 years**Adults ages 45 to 64:** 1,079**Adults ages 64 and older:** 901**Percentage of adults ages 45 and older compared with total population:** 43%**Median household income:** \$55,055 (2007)**Other key information:** The median age of residents in Rio Vista is 40.7 years, compared with the California median of 33.3 years. Rio Vista's population grew more than 58% between 2000 and 2009, and is projected to triple within 15 years, with development of senior housing generating nearly half of the residential growth.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Industry: Local Government Agency**CHALLENGE**

Rio Vista, like many cities across the United States, experienced dramatic decreases in property and sales tax revenue in 2008 due to steep declines in the housing market, rising unemployment, and marked reductions in consumer spending. Compounding the problem was California's legislature, which passed the state budget at a record late date that year. This unprecedented stalemate resulted in a loss of millions of dollars to local governments for several state-mandated "safety-net" services.

Rio Vista faced a deficit of nearly \$1 million out of a \$6.6 million operating budget. City leaders took steps to curb costs, including reducing the number and hours of 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. In the past, the city might have turned to grant writers, economic development consultants, or researchers to help with supplemental funding efforts, but there was no money for what were now considered "extras."

Cuts in public services and staff reductions are often more noticeable in smaller towns, where resources are frequently stretched thin even in good economic times. Older adults who live on fixed incomes are especially vulnerable to local economic woes. Many are hit hardest in the area of housing costs—they may have problems finding affordable housing or keeping up with rising mortgage payments.

SOLUTION

The city put out a call to the local community. The city wanted to attract volunteers (e.g., retirees), especially those with business experience who would be willing to share their talents to benefit the city during this critical time.

In response, a few local residents developed a business plan for a new volunteer program, including a request for résumés from potential volunteers, and submitted their package to the city council. To quell some council members' fears about lack of capacity to manage and coordinate a citywide program, the

business plan described the model for the program—a temporary employment agency. As needs arose within the city and community, related tasks would be posted as “job descriptions” on the program’s web site. Potential community volunteers could then review these descriptions in light of their own skills and interests to find suitable matches. Thus the organization known as “Volunteers Enriching Rio Vista Environments” (VERVE) was born. Today, the web site prominently promotes local schools as primary volunteer locations, along with large community-wide events, such as the Annual Bass Festival and Airport Day.

As a primary recruitment ground for skilled professionals, VERVE targeted Trilogy, a local adult housing development of more than 2,000 homes, which boasts an active community of older retirees. Although Trilogy provided a good initial pool of potential volunteers, the recruitment process was broad-based and inclusive—seeking community members of all ages and from various groups, including parents, students, and business owners.

RESULTS

VERVE has succeeded on many fronts. For example, two retired professionals volunteered to help the city secure much-needed funding. They’re applying their skills to developing economic stimulus grant proposals for the city—completing and sending out six proposals for consideration. This volunteer grant-writing effort has saved the city nearly \$7,000 in labor costs.

Another project aims to replace a retaining wall and irrigation system located on the grounds of the middle school. This has become a joint project involving a local service organization and the school parents’ club.

VERVE is currently recruiting for volunteer appraisers to help clear a property appraisal backlog resulting from an increasing number of active short sales and home foreclosures in the city.



Even as the downturn rippled through the community, many residents, especially older adults, began to increase their commitment to volunteering and engaged in local youth activities and general city maintenance. According to City Treasurer Hale Conklin, “The city has saved over \$10,000 per year in 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.”

AGING WELL BENEFITS—COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

When considering how to leverage dwindling resources, cities should look for ways to engage local residents in community and civic activities. Residents can provide a variety of valuable services that augment local efforts without requiring significant funding. Yet the beauty of volunteer service is that it also provides meaning and purpose to those seeking to help others in need, and it enhances the health and well-being of those who volunteer.

Intergenerational activities that connect older adults and younger people produce multiple benefits, such as encouraging greater civic engagement among participants in both age groups. These activities reduce isolation and loneliness among older adults. They also help dispel negative “ageist” stereotypes that older people often hold about younger people, and vice versa.

Perhaps more importantly, young people involved in intergenerational programs show measurable improvements in school attendance, positive attitudes toward school, optimism about the future, and positive feelings toward older people. Similarly, older adult volunteers report substantial benefits

themselves: the satisfaction of sharing their experience, feeling useful, and giving back to the community.



PROMISING PRACTICES—LESSONS LEARNED

- Promote civic engagement through community-wide projects and action.
- Identify strengths and talents in communities and match these with city needs.
- Brand the partnership in a positive way (e.g., “VERVE”) to attract potential stakeholders.
- Recognize community volunteerism by establishing formal roles working alongside city staff.
- Seek creative partnerships with skilled retirees and other community volunteers.
- Create easy access to volunteer opportunities by using the Internet to promote them to the community.
- Promote and nurture relationships among city leadership and local community volunteers.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This case study is part of [Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement & Action](#). This toolkit includes a community planning overview; guides for resident surveys, public forums, and focus groups; case studies; and a list of aging-related resources. For the complete toolkit, visit <http://www.civicpartnerships.org/aging-well>.

CONTACT

Hale Conklin
City Treasurer
City of Rio Vista
One Main Street
Rio Vista, CA 94571
(707) 374-3379
hconklin@ci.rio-vista.ca.us

Gale Bowen
Director, Volunteers
Enriching Rio Vista
Environments (VERVE)
207-A Main Street
Rio Vista, CA 94571
(707) 374-5650
administrator@riovolunteers.com

City of Rio Vista
(707) 374-6451
www.rio-vista-ca.com



Center for Civic Partnerships
1851 Heritage Lane, Suite 250
Sacramento, CA 95815
Tel: (916) 646-8680
Fax: (916) 646-8660
Web site: www.civicpartnerships.org
Email: ccp@civicpartnerships.org

