

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Whiting: Meet Stanton, Orange County's scrappiest city

BY DAVID WHITING

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Another column in an occasional series on every city in Orange County.

Before any Stanton jokes, understand that its residents have done what few communities could pull off – they voted themselves a sales tax increase.

Yes, this community has so much pride, so much moxie that in November voters chose to have the highest sales tax in the county. And already the desperately needed revenue is changing Orange County's poorest – and scrappiest – city.

The placard on the visitor's counter at Stanton City Hall captures this comeback story. It says that by boosting sales tax from 8 percent to 9 percent, the city has restored personnel to handle 911 calls.

That's right, 911 personnel. Heck, even police patrols, which had been slashed, are now restored.

To survive, the city cut deep into bone. And to keep the city in the black, the formula is simple: The city has only 28 full-time staff and watches dollars by contracting out as much as possible, including law enforcement, fire and ambulance service.

But even during the city's worst days, residents rose up to save their city. And not just Boy Scout types.

I'm talking about volunteers like Victor Barrios, a former gangbanger paralyzed from a .32-caliber bullet to the spine.

Without getting anything more than sweat, Barrios rode atop a mower and cut the lawn in Hollenbeck Park, a 10-acre swath of land.

ON THE MEND

Three years ago, the city couldn't afford to keep popular parks open.

That decision revealed a lot, considering that Stanton has thousands of residents who live in apartments and has one of the densest populations in the county.

How dense? Mission Viejo spreads 96,000 residents over nearly 18 square miles. Stanton packs more than 38,000 people into 3.1 square miles.

In his office off Beach Boulevard and Katella Avenue – two of the county's busiest thoroughfares – City Manager Jim Box admits, "For seven years we were not able to balance the budget."

Still, the city persevered, the parks are open again, and Stanton is emerging into the financial light.

Box points to a newly created strategic plan for the city, emphasizing such goals as providing a safe community, a strong local economy, transparent government. As Box talks, he details the focus – and bringing the plans to fruition.

Transparency? On Stanton's website, you can easily find the curious (the city flower is bird of paradise) and

the serious (the city budget, which totals nearly \$34 million).

Safe? The littlest city that can – thanks to the sales tax increase – also has added a code enforcer and two part-time “park rangers.”

The rangers are not sworn officers and don't carry firearms. Instead, they tell people to behave and report problems they can't mediate to law enforcement. In the past 12 months, rangers handled 1,248 incidents and interactions.

Sure, the need for park rangers speaks to the city's rough-and-tumble reputation.

But Box says a \$1.5 million crime-prevention grant, two neighborhood injunctions preventing gang members from associating and efforts by Orange County Sheriff's deputies have decreased property crimes.

Violent crimes are holding steady. Stanton had 1,661 property crimes five years ago, according to Lt. Jim England, chief of police, and last year that dropped to 1,095.

At the same time, property crimes in most Orange County cities went up.

“We've taken a community that was cash-strapped,” Box says, “that was gang infested, and we're turning it around.”

Still, Box acknowledges, “We've got this image that's going to take years and years to go away.”

That's unfortunate, because Stanton has hidden gems.

FUN FOR ALL AGES

First the cool stuff, then the really cool stuff.

Dotson Park's makeover boasts state-of-the-art play equipment and includes a mock pirate ship. Veterans Memorial Park is beautifully landscaped with drought-resistant plants. And once it's completed, the new Stanton Central Park should boast sports fields, a skate park, tennis courts, a water feature for children and a rec center.

Now, the really cool.

Park Avenue restaurant features steaks and chops and has a sterling reputation in the city, although the Register's food critic takes exception. The restaurant also has a four-star recommendation on Yelp with more than 700 reviews.

Straddling the Stanton-Anaheim border, historic and funky Hobby City covers nearly 12 acres with a down-home mix of shops hawking everything from baseball cards to model cars, as well as a doll and toy museum.

Adventure City, next to Hobby City, offers thrills for wee ones. Box mentions he recently took his niece and reports a cozy, safe, secure atmosphere perfect for a child learning to venture out.

Sure, Adventure City is no Disney California Adventure. But that's part of its charm. Among other things, Adventure City includes a petting farm, a roller-coaster, a carousel, as well as firetruck, plane and balloon rides.

Still, Stanton can't get the respect it deserves. Adventure City – within Stanton's boundaries – lists its address as Anaheim.

MOVING FORWARD

As we talk, Box turns toward future plans. They are modest compared to those of, say, Irvine, where hundreds of homes are under construction. But Stanton prices are not Irvine prices.

Box says 41 single-family residences are being built with prices hovering around \$465,000.

That's right. A house with a yard for less than \$500,000.

The city also is working on reducing overhead power lines along Beach Boulevard for a cleaner, more streamlined appearance.

Next year, Stanton will mark its 60th anniversary, and it appears the city will be on its strongest financial footing in years.

But as Box talks – and as I check out the city – it's clear the real secret to Stanton's emerging success is people.

And Barrios? Today, the former gangbanger is a parks and recreation commissioner.

Contact the writer: dwhiting@ocregister.com