

Highway City center reopens with a science theme

By George Hostetter
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The Highway City Community Science Center officially reopened on Wednesday in Fresno with — what else? — a two-in-one experiment.

How many speeches can be crammed into a single ceremony?

Luis Miranda, 28, a facilitator at the Highway City Community Science center who also lives in Highway City, stands in front of the Grace the Gray Whale display. | George Hostetter ghostetter@fresnobee.com

Does momentum count in the re-energizing of a historic community?

The answer to No. 1: Mere mortals lost count.

To No. 2: A resounding yes.

More than 100 people gathered in the late morning to formally welcome the return to life of Highway City's favorite community building.

The 4,000-square-foot structure, once deemed a neighborhood center, has been transformed by the strange alchemy of the Great Recession into a community science hub.

The messy details of ancient public policy took a back seat to an hour of celebration. City Hall had done something right for the kids of a neighborhood all-too-easy to forget.

"This is a fantastic day," said Council Member Steve Brandau, who serves Highway City. He called the science center a "dynamic" addition to the Parks Department's array of services.

Environmental education and science are the hallmark of our new Highway City Community Science Center.

Parks Director Manuel Mollinedo

Council Member Esmeralda Soria, whose district begins only a short walk south of Highway City, said the center will draw young science enthusiasts from throughout the city.

"This facility will truly make an impact on our community," Soria said.

Parks Director Manuel Mollinedo unlimbered his diplomatic skills, praising Brandau and Soria for their commitments while thanking everyone on a long list of science-center supporters.

Parks, Mollinedo said, is "a department that can help change kids' lives."

These three and others had good reason to grab the microphone and crow. Highway City's beloved park not long ago just about bit the dust.

The recession slammed into City Hall in 2009 and had everyone in panic mode the following year. Part of Mayor Ashley Swearingin's response was a call to community groups: Keep the community center of your choice open by adopting it. That's government code for assuming the financial burden.



No one gave a hoot for the Highway City Neighborhood Center. It went dark.

Then something happened. Life moved on.

The dark clouds of insolvency lifted at City Hall.

\$200,000

The science center's estimated annual budget

The city's long-running community science program (overseen by Manuel Hernandez) outgrew its digs at a park near Manchester Center.

Brandau took office in January 2013 and cast an eye on the needs of Highway City.

Mollinedo came to town in spring 2014 and decided there were unexplored grant opportunities.

Dispensers of grants — San Joaquin River Conservancy, PG&E, California Tinkering After School Network, Community Science Workshop Network — took notice.

The result was unveiled Wednesday. What had been a neighborhood center on a small patch of green space is now a science center. The mission is as broad and exciting as intellectual exploration itself. It's sufficient to add that youngsters are at the heart of it all.

Highway City has been around almost forever. It's located in a crook of Highway 99 and Shaw Avenue. The San Joaquin River is nearby. So, too, are railroad tracks.

The mind's picture isn't wrong. A lot of asphalt, cars and noise pound on Highway City every day.

Highway City is blessed with residents who love the place.

Council Members Steve Brandau and Esmeralda Soria both promise to be a champion of Highway City's interests.

Luis Miranda, 28, is a facilitator at the center. He lives in Highway City. His family has lived in Highway City for some 70 years.

"The rec center almost died — it really did," Miranda said Wednesday amid the post-ceremony bustle. "Now that it's a science center, it brings us together in a different way."

Miranda is just warming up.

"We give kids a new perspective on things," he said. "To see that light bulb go on in their heads — that's the amazing thing."

No one can dispute that Highway City is sometimes treated like an orphan, Miranda said.

"We really needed something on this side of town," he said. "We have a few basketball courts. But we didn't have something with the impact of a science center."

He and others went door-to-door to tell their neighborhoods about the new science center.

"I told them, 'If you have any questions, I live down the street. Feel free to flag me down,'" Miranda said.

He didn't want to stop talking. The science center had him, his neighbors, his community going in the right direction. The mighty "mo" — momentum — is on their side.

“We have a lot of faith in our community,” Miranda said. “We have pride in our houses. We watch out for each other. That’s what community is.”

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