



Awards of Distinction

Category:

Outstanding
Activity, Program, or
Event
(Large District)

CARPD Awards of Distinction Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee



Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors outstanding and unique achievements in program planning, development, and implementation of a District activity or special event.

Nominee: Festival De Los Muertos

District: Conejo Recreation & Park District

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

The Conejo Recreation and Park District (CRPD) has a rich history of hosting engaging community events that bring residents together from the Conejo Valley and greater Ventura County area. In November 2023, CRPD introduced El Festival de los Muertos, a vibrant one-day celebration held at Borchard Community Park in Newbury Park, honoring the traditional Mexican holiday, Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). The idea derived from part-time staff who participated in an organizational run, professional growth training program, tasked with a group project to design a new special event.

Designed as a free, family-friendly special event, El Festival de los Muertos provides a welcoming space where individuals of all backgrounds can gather to celebrate, learn, and experience this meaningful tradition. Now in its third year, the festival has quickly grown into a highly anticipated event, attracting approximately 3,000 attendees this past November.

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The festival highlights art, culture, and community partnerships. Local organizations, artists, and volunteers contribute by creating colorful artistic displays, providing traditional Calavera (skull) face painting, hosting children’s activities, and operating artisan craft booths. A vendor marketplace features local merchants and artists selling handcrafted goods such as themed jewelry, garments, artwork, and Día de los Muertos staples, decorative sugar skulls.

Live entertainment further enriches the experience, with performances from mariachi musicians, folklórico and Aztec dancers, and vocal performers who showcase the music and dances associated with the holiday. A variety of food trucks serving Mexican food and desserts adds flavor to the event.

A centerpiece of the festival is the community ofrenda (altar) display. Created in partnership with local cultural groups, artists, and residents, the altars honor loved ones who have passed while educating attendees about the history and symbolism of Día de los Muertos, creating a meaningful space for remembrance, reflection, and celebration of life. The event brings people from all cultural backgrounds together to experience and participate in this popular Mexican holiday.

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Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee



Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors outstanding and unique achievements in program planning, development, and implementation of a District activity or special event.

Nominee: Community Memorial for Cupcake

District: Cordova Recreation & Park District

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

The Cordova Recreation & Park District's (District) Community Memorial for Cupcake the Donkey was a thoughtfully planned and deeply meaningful event that honored a beloved animal who had become an enduring symbol of Hagan Community Park. For years, Cupcake served as an unofficial ambassador of the park, creating personal connections with visitors through daily interactions that became cherished traditions for many families.

Following Cupcake's passing, the District recognized the significant emotional impact on the community, as hundreds of residents shared memories and condolences both in person and across social media. In response, the District quickly developed and implemented a memorial event that provided a welcoming space for collective remembrance, reflection and celebration of Cupcake's life.

The event demonstrated exceptional program planning and community-centered design. Held at the Hagan Community Barn, where Cupcake had resided before his passing, the memorial featured live music, interactive craft activities, a memory board inside Cupcake's

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stall and a curated slideshow that included a special video message from “Parks and Recreation” actor Jim O’Heir (better known as his character, Gary). Each element was intentionally designed to encourage participation, storytelling and shared experiences among attendees of all ages. The combination of structured programming and open-ended opportunities for reflection allowed the event to feel both organized and deeply personal.

A key strength of the event was its ability to translate community sentiment into a meaningful and inclusive experience. The District effectively engaged residents by honoring the stories and traditions associated with Cupcake, including families who had visited him for generations and individuals who associated him with significant personal memories. By centering the event around these shared connections, the District created an atmosphere that fostered unity, comfort and community pride.

The implementation of the memorial was both timely and impactful, demonstrating the District’s ability to respond quickly to community needs while maintaining a high level of quality and intention in event delivery. Attendance and participation reflected the strong emotional connection residents had with Cupcake, and the event successfully transformed collective grief into a positive, shared experience.

Through thoughtful planning, creative programming and meaningful community engagement, Cupcake’s Community Memorial exemplified excellence in special event development and execution. The event not only honored a unique and cherished part of the District’s identity, but also strengthened community bonds and reinforced the role of parks and recreation in bringing people together during moments that matter most.

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Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee



Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors outstanding and unique achievements in program planning, development, and implementation of a District activity or special event.

Nominee: Veterans Town Hall

District: Desert Recreation District

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

Desert Recreation District's Veterans Town Hall stands out as a meaningful and highly effective community driven initiative because it was built on a simple but powerful principle: listen first. At the time of the event, DRD did not offer veteran specific programming, so rather than making assumptions, the District created a welcoming public forum where veterans and their families could directly share their needs, barriers, and ideas for future services. The event was intentionally designed as a listening focused open house and town hall, with facilitated discussion, resource connections, and family friendly activities that made participation accessible and inviting.

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Held on Saturday, January 31, 2026, the Veterans Town Hall combined ceremony, community discussion, and one on one engagement in a format that honored veterans while also producing real, actionable outcomes. The program included a ceremonial opening, remarks from community leaders, a featured presentation, and an open discussion period designed to capture veteran priorities and guide next steps. DRD structured the event to gather direct feedback on recreation, wellness, social connection, family programming, accessibility, transportation, and partnership opportunities, creating a clear roadmap for both immediate action and long term planning.



What makes this program especially deserving of recognition is that it did not end when the event concluded. The Veterans Town Hall immediately led to implementation. DRD has already launched several veteran centered efforts, including Veterans Guitar Lessons, Ruck Walks, and a chili cookoff fundraiser supporting local athletes attending the Veteran Disability Games in Chicago later this year. The District also implemented Veterans Parking signs at DRD locations across the Coachella Valley, a visible and lasting sign of recognition and respect. These early outcomes reflect the event's success not only in planning and outreach, but in translating community voice into real services and meaningful districtwide change.

The Town Hall also demonstrated excellence in implementation. DRD thoughtfully planned the event to ensure comfort, accessibility, and meaningful engagement for attendees, including veterans with mobility needs, hearing limitations, and those who may be sensitive to crowded indoor spaces. Instead of a lecture style meeting, we created opportunities for both public discussion and private one on one conversations, and brought in veteran resource organizations to connect attendees with existing services. This intentional design helped build trust and created the foundation for an ongoing relationship between DRD and the veteran community.

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The Veterans Town Hall is an outstanding example of how a parks and recreation district can identify a community need, respond with care and creativity, and quickly turn input into action.

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Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee



Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors outstanding and unique achievements in program planning, development, and implementation of a District activity or special event.

Nominee: Bands & Brews Summer Concert Series

District: Greater Vallejo Recreation District

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

Introduction & Overview

The Bands & Brews Summer Concert Series is an annual community event presented by the Greater Vallejo Recreation District that celebrates local culture by bringing together residents and visitors for live music, craft beverages, and family-friendly entertainment throughout the summer season. Over multiple weeks, the series features a diverse lineup of regional musicians, support for local breweries, and a welcoming atmosphere that fosters community pride and social connection.

Program Planning & Development

The concert series was thoughtfully designed to expand GVRD's cultural offerings, encourage community interaction in public spaces, and support local creative industries. Strategic partnerships with regional breweries and artists have elevated the event's profile and reinforced its place as a signature summer experience in Vallejo. Logistics, safety measures, and accessibility were prioritized in planning each event, ensuring an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all ages.

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Community Impact & Engagement

Bands & Brews has become a highly anticipated program that consistently draws significant attendance from Vallejo and neighboring communities. The series supports local musicians by providing performance opportunities, showcases craft brewing partners to a broad audience, and generates positive economic impact for downtown businesses during concert evenings. Attendees consistently share feedback about the event's role in strengthening community identity and enhancing Vallejo's cultural vibrancy.



Innovation & Excellence

The series blends entertainment and community celebration in a unique way that elevates GVRD's programming portfolio. By combining quality live music with curated beverage experiences, GVRD has created an engaging, memorable event that goes beyond traditional recreation programming. Efforts to incorporate diverse musical genres and local talent demonstrate GVRD's commitment to inclusivity and creativity.

Conclusion

The Bands & Brews Summer Concert Series exemplifies excellence in activity and special event programming through thoughtful planning, strong community partnerships, cultural relevance, and measurable positive impact. It is a distinguished example of how recreation and park districts can enrich community life and foster public engagement through innovative and accessible programming.

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CARPD Outstanding Activity/Program/Special Event - Nominee



CARPD Outstanding Activity/Program/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors programming or planning that supports environmental sustainability in the operation and management of District facilities.

Nominee: GVRD Recreation Expo

District: Greater Vallejo Recreation District (GVRD)

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

The GVRD Recreation Expo is an annual community engagement event designed to connect residents directly with recreation programs, services, and opportunities offered by the Greater Vallejo Recreation District. Now in its fourth year, the Expo has grown into a signature outreach event that removes barriers to participation while building awareness, access, and excitement around district programs.

Held as a high-energy, one-day, three-hour event, the Expo brings together program staff, instructors, community partners (last year we had 24 community partners), and families in an interactive environment where attendees can explore offerings, meet staff, and register on the spot.

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Planning, Development & Purpose

The Recreation Expo was created to address a key challenge: many families were unaware of the full range of GVRD programs or needed in-person assistance to navigate registration and scholarship opportunities. Staff developed the Expo as a centralized, welcoming, and hands-on way to:

- Increase awareness of district programs
- Provide real-time registration support
- Expand access to scholarships and financial assistance
- Build stronger relationships with the community

Each year, the event has evolved based on participant feedback, with improved layout, clearer program pathways, and more direct access to staff who can answer questions and assist with enrollment.



Community Impact

The Recreation Expo has demonstrated measurable and meaningful impact:

- Over 500 patrons attended the most recent event in 2025.
- The Expo generated the highest on-site summer registrations of the season

Staff approved over 112 youth summer camp registrations during the event through on-site scholarship support

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In just a three-hour window, the Expo significantly increased youth access to recreation opportunities, particularly for families who benefit from financial assistance. By combining outreach, enrollment, and scholarship processing in one location, GVRD reduced barriers that often prevent participation.

Innovation & Excellence

What sets the Recreation Expo apart is its access-first model. Rather than simply promoting programs, the event is structured to convert interest into participation immediately. Families leave not just informed, but successfully enrolled.

The Expo reflects GVRD's commitment to:

- Equity in recreation access
- Proactive community engagement
- Customer-centered service delivery
- Continuous program improvement

The year-over-year growth in attendance and registrations demonstrates the event's success and its increasing value to the community.

Conclusion

The GVRD Recreation Expo is more than a promotional event, it is a strategic, high-impact initiative that expands access to recreation, strengthens community trust, and connects hundreds of residents with life-enriching programs. Its measurable outcomes, innovative approach, and growing community reach make it a distinguished example of excellence in recreation programming.

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CARPD Awards of Distinction Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee



Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors outstanding and unique achievements in program planning, development, and implementation of a District activity or special event.

Nominee: Camp Create

District: Hayward Area Recreation and Park District

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

Camp Create is an innovative youth arts and enrichment program developed by the Hayward Area Recreation and Park District that provides a welcoming, creative environment where young people can explore artistic expression, build confidence, and develop new skills. Designed to encourage imagination and hands-on learning, Camp Create blends visual arts, crafts, creative exploration, and collaborative projects into a dynamic program that celebrates creativity while supporting youth development.

The program was intentionally designed to provide a unique recreation experience that differs from traditional camps. Rather than focusing on a single activity, Camp Create introduces participants to a variety of artistic mediums and creative experiences that encourage experimentation and self-expression. Campers engage in projects such as painting, sculpture, mixed media art, design challenges, and collaborative installations. These activities not only build artistic skills but also foster problem-solving, teamwork, and confidence in young participants.

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Camp Create also reflects the District's commitment to accessibility and inclusive recreation. The program is structured to welcome participants of varying skill levels and backgrounds, ensuring that all children feel comfortable exploring creativity in a supportive environment. By emphasizing participation and discovery rather than competition, the camp helps build self-esteem and encourages youth to view creativity as a lifelong outlet for expression.

A key strength of Camp Create is its thoughtful program planning and implementation. District staff developed a curriculum that balances structure with creative freedom, allowing participants to learn new techniques while still exploring their own ideas. Staff members serve as mentors and facilitators, guiding campers through projects while encouraging independent thinking and collaboration. The result is a highly engaging program that consistently generates enthusiasm from participants and families alike.



The program has produced meaningful outcomes for both participants and the District. Camp Create has become a highly sought-after seasonal offering, drawing strong enrollment and positive feedback from families. Participants leave the program with tangible creations as well as strengthened confidence, creativity, and social connections. The success of the program has also expanded opportunities for the District to deliver arts-based recreation programming that enriches the community without requiring specialized facilities or costly equipment.

Camp Create's model is easily adaptable and demonstrates a best practice approach for recreation agencies seeking to expand creative programming. The program's flexible structure allows it to be implemented in a variety of community spaces and scaled based on available resources. By combining thoughtful curriculum design, passionate staff leadership, and a welcoming creative environment, Camp Create provides a replicable framework for arts-based youth programming.

Through its originality, strong program design, and meaningful impact on youth participants, Camp Create exemplifies excellence in recreation programming. The program not only enriches the lives of young people but also strengthens community connections through shared creative experiences. Camp Create stands as a model of how innovative recreation

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programming can inspire creativity, encourage personal growth, and provide memorable experiences for youth and families.

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Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors outstanding and unique achievements in program planning, development, and implementation of a District activity or special event.

Nominee: Grinchmas

District: Valley-Wide Recreation and Park District

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

Valley-Wide Recreation and Park District has long offered annual Christmas-themed activities for the 275,000 residents of our district. There is our annual Tree Lighting and Breakfast With Santa at our regional park in San Jacinto and Gingerbread House building nights in French Valley, Menifee and Valle Vista.

When Robert Byers, the Recreation Supervisor at Winchester Domenigoni Park, was looking for a unique holiday event for the Francis Domenigoni Community Center, he thought outside of the box and created Grinchmas, a fun activity centered around Dr. Seuss' beloved book, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!"

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Children gather for the reading of the popular Christmas story. They also are opportunities to play games, eat snacks and have their photograph taken with the Grinch.

The highlight of the evening is the prize drawing. Every child and adult are given a raffle ticket for the opportunity to win toys and other great prizes. The entire event is free thanks to generous community donors. The Dedicated Volunteers of Winchester Bingo group donates prizes and cash to buy gifts as a thank you for allowing them to using the community center for its weekly games. Another generous donation came from the Winchester-Homeland Homeowners Association, ensuring that almost every child who participated went home with a gift.

Grinchmas is a wonderful way to take a Christmas tradition and turn it into something unique for our residents. It also highlights how community partnerships benefit Valley-Wide and our visitors.

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Outstanding Activity/Special Event - Nominee

Criteria: Honors outstanding and unique achievements in program planning, development, and implementation of a District activity or special event.

Nominee: Pat O'Brien Community Center Book Exchange

District: Southgate Recreation & Park District

District Submission:



Summary of Nomination

This Book Exchange was created to make reading more accessible in a way that is free, easy to use, and part of everyday community life. Built on a “take a book, leave a book” model, it removes common barriers that often stand between people and books. There is no membership, no checkout process, and no cost. Residents can stop by, browse, take a book home, or leave one behind. That simple approach has made the Book Exchange more than a place to find reading material. It has become a shared community resource that supports literacy, trust, and connection.

The program was made possible through the County of Sacramento Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) Grant Program. The District partnered with the County and neighborhood leader Lee Miller. As the County determined that funding for a library in the growing community was unlikely soon, Lee Miller advocated for the Bookmobile to make visits to Pat O'Brien Community Center to help address the gap in service. While that effort was successful, it was clear that the community needed a more consistent and readily available source of access to books than the Bookmobile could provide. In response, the District is offering books onsite at Pat O'Brien Community Center, helping establish the foundation for what would become the Book Exchange.

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The program grew from a clear community purpose: to place books within easy reach and create another welcoming point of access for residents of all ages. By locating the exchange at Pat O'Brien Community Center, the District placed a literacy resource in a familiar public space already used by families, youth, adults, and senior communities.

The collection is designed to serve a wide range of readers and interests. Donations include children's books, early readers, chapter books, young adult titles, adult fiction, non-fiction, classics, and books of local interest. The program encourages gently used or new books that reflect the diversity of the community. Just as important, it gives residents a direct role in sustaining the program. Community members are not only visitors to the Book Exchange. They help build it each time they contribute a book, discover a new one, and return again. That shared participation has helped create a strong sense of neighborhood pride and ownership.

A mural by local artist Madelyne Templeton adds a warm and inviting presence to the site and helps the Book Exchange stand out as a cared-for public resource. Open year-round with seasonal hours and accessible during daily routines, whether someone is on a morning walk, stopping by after work, or visiting the community center for another reason. It keeps books present in a shared public space and makes reading feel close at hand.

The Pat O'Brien Community Center Book Exchange demonstrates that an outstanding program does not need to be large to have strong community impact. By expanding access to reading, reducing barriers, encouraging community participation, and strengthening neighborhood pride, Southgate Recreation & Park District has created a program that is clear in purpose, inclusive in practice, and rooted in public service. It is a strong example of how local agencies can strengthen community life one shared book at a time.

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