

VIDA EN EL VALLE

Life is good, better with city water piped to East Porterville homes

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By Daniel Casarez

East Porterville- It took a devastating five-year drought that turned areas in Tulare and Santa Barbara counties into Ground Zero and forced hundreds of families to become resourceful when their water wells dried up before officials stepped in.

For Rocío Rodríguez, it meant sharing water with two other homes for a year through a garden hose across her Page Street house to her sister Ramona Acevedo and also their niece Xóchitl Aguilera. Her relatives' homes shared the same water well.

That was, until four months ago when the Rodríguez well dried up.

The water sharing ran like clockwork.

"We ran the hose, and at a certain time of the day I did the house chores," said Rodríguez, who lives with her elderly parents.

"Then I turned it off so that she could do it; she turned it off, then she did it. We had to rotate."

Even the men did their part. The males would urinate in their back yards to conserve toilet water.

"I told (the men) to do the same; that's the only way to survive the situation as far as we can get," said Rodríguez.

The need for running water was crucial because each household had small children.

These days, the sharing of water from the tiny home and backyard restrooms are in the past now that construction crews are connecting hundreds of East Porterville homes to the Porterville municipal water system.

"Luckily, because of the drought, we were finally getting some attention in East Porterville," said Rodríguez.

About 73 percent of the community's 7,300 residents are Latino.

The free, water hookup for East Porterville homes is courtesy of a \$35 million grant from the State Water Board and additional support from federal and local agencies.

The 300-gallon tanks on front lawns that were filled twice weekly with non-potable water by county workers will soon become a memory. Just like bottled water stations throughout the community and mobile showers that were set up in the parking lot of Iglesia Immanuel. Some schools opened their locker rooms for students to shower before the morning bell. Only several households continue to use water tanks until the hookup is finished.

Fire hydrants are being installed, but have yet to be hooked up. They are covered with black plastic so that fire crews don't mistakenly attempt to use them during an emergency.



A construction worker uses a machine to burrow piping for water connectivity to a house on Page Street in east Porterville on August 23, 2017. Hundreds of households are receiving free connectivity through state, federal and local funding. Daniel Casares- dcasarez@vidaenelvalle.com



Alexandre and Maria Chavez outside their East Porterville home. The Family has a 300- gallon water tank installed by Self-Help Enterprises until their water connection is established by the end of August 2017. Daniel Casarez – dcasarez@vidaenelvalle.com

Recently, Rodríguez showed off the running water inside the 3-bedroom home shared with her parents, Manuel and Lenora Acevedo; her husband; and, their two young boys.

The home was among 300 that have been connected thus far. Another 400 are next.

“The ones that we connected early on were the people that were already out of water,” said Fred Beltrán, who oversees the water tanks and construction for Self-Help Enterprises.

Beltrán and his wife, Elva, along with their grown son, began coordinating water delivery and bottled water stations in the community in 2014 through their Porterville Area Coordinating Committee (PACC) foundation. Self-Help Enterprises now oversees the connections. CSET under the direction of Self-Help Enterprises is handling the final piping in the homes.

Dr. Steve Doe, a manager with the East Porterville Water Supply Project, said 329 households have chosen “not to be part of the project.”

“These represent about 30 percent of all eligible homes in East Porterville,” said Doe in an e-mail. “Our understanding is that most of them have water in their private wells and don’t want to give up their private wells.”

A condition for the water hookup under the project requires the private water wells be disconnected once the connection is made. About 300 households were eligible to register to open a city water account and connection by March 31 in the first phase. Another 750 are eligible for the second phase this summer.

Workers are completing about five hookups daily.

Doe, who also works for the California Department of Water Resources, expects every household that wants the hookup will be connected by the end of the year.

Residents want other improvements

Rodríguez believes more should be done in the way of safety and improvements in the unincorporated community.

She’s adamant about speed bumps, the lack of street lights and public parks, but mainly policing.

“We need a place where the kids can play like a little park. All the parks and recreation things are within city limits, but we’re not in city limits,” said Rodríguez.

“And you cannot even go to the school. Once the school (Alta Vista Elementary) closes down, nobody is allowed on campus. So where do those kids play? You don’t know how many times parents have saved the lives of children here because of cars driving by.”

Rodríguez, who has a 2-year-old son, said the feeling is the same with many of the parents in the community.