

SJV WATER

Water first destroyed, and will now rebuild, the historic town of Allensworth

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Starting nearly 118 years ago, arsenic-laced groundwater and dry wells all but killed the hopes of California's only town founded and governed by African Americans, many of them formerly enslaved.

On Tuesday, residents of Allensworth celebrated a new well that will finally bring clean, abundant water to the town that was beset by water troubles soon after it was founded 1908 by Col. Allen Allensworth.

"It was water that destroyed Allensworth," said Sherry Hunter, president of the Allensworth Community Services District.

But now, Hunter and others have hopes of a rebirth and even growth for the town of 530 residents.

"I cannot thank the people here enough for their support. It means so, so much," Hunter said of a slew of different agency representatives on hand Tuesday who've helped push the project,

which Hunter began pursuing in 2012 after a feasibility study showed it was the town's only path forward.

The new well, along with an arsenic treatment system and 500,000-gallon storage tank, are being paid for through a \$3.8 million grant from the Water Resources Control Board's Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) program.

Hunter gave a special shout-out to engineer Curtis Skaggs, who she said is "worth his weight in gold."

"We don't run when things get hard," said Skaggs, who works at Dee Jaspar & Associates. "We work with a lot of DACs (disadvantaged communities) and Allensworth is special in that its residents are very invested in their community and they care as much about the project as we do and we don't always hear that."

Skaggs said construction on the well will begin in February and take about two months. The new 500,000 gallon tank will be completed in 2027.

"This is the biggest thing to happen in our community in a long time and it will change our community forever because we can afford to grow," said Allensworth CSD board member John Pope. "Without water, we can't live."

For decades, Allensworth has struggled with an aquifer contaminated with naturally-occurring arsenic, a well that couldn't supply enough water for the town's system and an undersized storage tank that could hold only 40,000 gallons.

In its early years, Allensworth also faced drought, racial discrimination, dry wells and debt when the company that sold the land backed out of a promise to build an adequate water system.

People moved away and the town, on the banks of the former Tulare Lake, withered. Today, the Col. Allensworth State Park occupies the town's original footprint with homes of mostly working families and a community center nearby.

Amidst a backdrop of crowing roosters and barking dogs Tuesday, Water Board member Nichole Morgan praised the residents' fortitude.

"Survival is never easy in the face of inequity and lack of support," she said. "Discrimination tried to stop this town but you forged ahead to keep this town alive despite many obstacles, including economic, society and environmental. Instead of allowing yourselves to be separated, you built partnerships."

Next up for Allensworth is to secure funding to upgrade its entire water system, including sewer services. All residents are on septic tanks, and the goal is to convey wastewater from the septic tanks to a centralized treatment plant.

The SAFER program was enacted in 2019 and has helped more than 320 small water systems serving more than 3.3 million Californians come into compliance with drinking water standards, according to the Water Board. The law also allows the state to appoint administrators for small systems. Consulting firm Stantec was named a limited scope administrator for Allensworth's water system in 2024 to help the Allensworth CSD move projects forward.