

Quarterly Newsletter

Q1 • January – March 2026

What's New

- Remembering Trustee John Rios
- Federal Funding Secured for Road and Accessibility Enhancements
- Improved Mowing Schedule Begins April 14
- Policies Surrounding Shades and Canopies

Honoring the Life and Service of Trustee John Rios

The Coachella Valley Public Cemetery District (CVPCD) mourns the passing of Trustee John Rios, a respected public servant, leader, and friend to many throughout the region. Trustee Rios passed away in February, leaving behind a legacy defined by humility, service, and an unwavering commitment to the people and institutions that shape our community.

Appointed to the Board of Trustees in September 2018, Trustee Rios served CVPCD for more than seven years. He brought both professional experience and heartfelt dedication to CVPCD's mission of honoring those who came before us while serving the families who visit the cemetery each day.

Trustee Rios had a deep personal connection to the cemetery. He was known to visit regularly to pay respects to loved ones laid to rest there. That personal connection guided his work on the Board. He consistently advocated for the dignity of the grounds, the quality of service provided to families, and the role the cemetery plays in preserving the history of the Coachella Valley.

During his tenure, CVPCD emerged as one of the most recognized cemetery districts in California. CVPCD earned the Government Finance Officers Association Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting in 2025, the California Special Districts Association Exceptional Public Outreach and Advocacy Award in 2024, the Special District Leadership Foundation District of Distinction designation in 2023, and the Special District Leadership Foundation's Transparency Certificate of Excellence in 2022.

While these achievements reflect the work of many, Trustee Rios played an important role in guiding CVPCD during this transformational period. His steady presence and thoughtful perspective helped ensure that every Board decision reflected CVPCD's commitment to serve families with care and respect.



"Trustee Rios was a dedicated servant to the community. His first concern was always for the families that visited our cemetery, working hard to ensure their experience was a positive one," said Board Chair Ernesto Rosales, reflecting on the compassion that defined Trustee Rios' work. *"From the condition of the cemetery landscape to the care and attention they received from staff, Trustee Rios cared deeply about the families we serve."*

"Trustee Rios was the embodiment of what it meant to be a public servant. He dedicated his entire life to making the Coachella Valley a better place and inspired many others to take up the effort. He was always a steady, positive force on our Board, and his presence will be dearly missed and forever treasured," said CVPCD General Manager Joshua Bonner.

Before he served on the CVPCD Board, Trustee Rios built a remarkable career in public safety. A firefighter for more than three decades, he began his career in the early 1970s with the Coachella Fire Department. Through dedication and leadership, he rose through the ranks from firefighter to Fire Chief. Following the City of Coachella's cooperative fire protection agreement with CAL FIRE and Riverside County Fire Department in 1990, he served as Battalion Chief at Fire Station 79 and later with Battalion 12B. After retiring in 2003, he returned to active duty with CAL FIRE in 2007 before retiring again in 2012.

His penchant for service extended far beyond his professional career. Trustee Rios was a longtime member of the Indio Elks Lodge and spent two decades supporting Baskets of Love, a nonprofit organization serving families in need throughout the Coachella Valley.

He also served on the Board of Directors for the Coachella Valley Recreation and Park District, now known as the Desert Recreation District, and volunteered as "Coach" Rios with the Eastern Coachella Valley Youth Baseball and Softball Organization. There, he mentored young athletes and instilled the values of teamwork, respect, and perseverance.

To those who knew him personally, Trustee Rios was a man of faith and integrity. **"The John Rios I knew was a man of action. He always wanted to act justly; to love grace, and he wanted to walk in purity with His God,"** said fellow Trustee Bruce Underwood.

Vice-Chair Judy Vossler reflected on their years serving together on the Board: **"John Rios was a great man. I considered him a good friend. Hearing of his passing hurt my heart. I had the privilege of working with John on the Coachella Valley Public Cemetery Board for more than five years. John was consistently an experienced voice of reason. John was a gentleman, a well-respected professional, and a community leader. I will miss John."**

Trustee Marcos Coronel, Jr. reflected on the character that defined Trustee Rios' leadership. **"John was a quiet and humble presence, the kind of man that had nothing to prove and no one to impress, completely self-assured in his faith and his commitment to good. There was no performance with John, no posturing, no agenda beyond simply doing right by the people he served. What you saw was exactly who he was, and who he was happened to be extraordinary. He had a quick wit and an easy smile that could lighten any room, and yet the moment the conversation turned to the work and the people this district serves, you felt that quiet but unmistakable resolve that defined everything about him. He pushed us to be better, and he did it not with fanfare, but with that steady, grounded presence that made you want to rise to meet him."**

Riverside County Supervisor V. Manuel Perez spoke to the lasting impact Trustee Rios, Supervisor Perez's former coach, had on the community he loved. **"Coach Rios was a kind-hearted Coachella pillar who had a positive impact on many as Coachella Fire Department Chief, Little League Firefighters Head Coach, and Trustee for the Coachella Valley Public Cemetery District. He will forever be my spiritual guide who always asked about my parents' well-being and consistently looked out for me ever since I can remember. I will certainly miss him dearly."**

Trustee Rios' legacy lives on in the families he served, the community he strengthened, and the example he set for those who continue the work. CVPCD honors Trustee Rios with gratitude and remembrance. His presence will be deeply missed, but his influence will continue to guide us for years to come.

\$1 Million Federal Investment to Improve Cemetery Roads and Veterans Memorial Access

CVPCD has secured \$1 million in federal funding to rehabilitate aging roadways serving the cemetery grounds and Veterans Memorial, creating a safer and more accessible environment for thousands of annual visitors.

"I'm proud to bring these resources home," said Congressman Raul Ruiz, M.D., "and I'll keep fighting for investments that make life more affordable for working people."

Pictured below, from left to right: Marcos Cornel, Jr., Trustee Marlene Navarro-Lupian, Cemetery Services Manager, Donna Ayala, Cemetery Services Specialist, Ernesto Rosales, Board Chair, Congressman Raul Ruiz, Judy Vossler, Vice-Chair, Dr. Bruce Underwood, Trustee and Jason Wilberts, Maintenance Supervisor



Financial support was secured through Community Project Funding requested by Congressman Raul Ruiz and included in the FY 2026 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development appropriations bill. This investment will support repairs to approximately one mile of decades-old internal cemetery roadways, including those surrounding the Veterans Memorial. It will restore key access and roadway segments that have degraded over time due to age, weather, and regular use. Expected to cost \$1.4 million in total, the federal funding covers roughly 70 percent of the project.

CVPCD serves families from Palm Desert, Indian Wells, La Quinta, Indio, Coachella, and communities throughout the eastern Coachella Valley, welcoming thousands of visitors annually, including veterans' families who gather at the Veterans Memorial to commemorate military service and sacrifice.

"The Board of Trustees appreciates Congressman Raul Ruiz's support in securing this federal investment," said CVPCD Board Chair Ernesto Rosales. "These federal resources reflect a sustained effort by CVPCD to address long-standing infrastructure needs in a responsible way. These resources allow us to make critical improvements while helping keep costs down for the families we serve."

While the funds have been appropriated by Congress, CVPCD officials will be working with federal partners in the coming months to finalize the agreement and begin planning the project.

"This road repair effort is about more than infrastructure; it is about the experience families have when they come to honor their loved ones," said CVPCD General Manager Joshua Bonner. "We believe our community deserves a beautiful, well-maintained cemetery and Veterans Memorial, and we are grateful for Congressman Raul Ruiz's continued support in helping move this project forward."

CVPCD is hopeful the work could begin in late 2026 or early 2027, pending finalization of a formal construction timeline. Updates will be provided to the community as the improvement effort progresses. For the latest information, visit CVPCD.org.



District Shifts to New Once-Per-Week Mowing Schedule in April

The District will implement a new mowing schedule beginning April 14 to streamline cemetery maintenance and make visits more convenient for families. Historically, the cemetery has been maintained in two separate sections, with the east side mowed on Tuesdays and the west side on Thursdays. While this approach allowed staff to spread maintenance work throughout the week, it has often caused confusion for visitors, especially for families who are new to the cemetery and unsure which day their loved one's section would be maintained.

The split schedule also created challenges for families with loved ones interred in different sections of the cemetery. In many cases, memorial items needed to be removed and returned on different days depending on the section, requiring multiple visits within the same week. Communicating schedule changes has also been difficult, particularly when one mowing day falls on a holiday while the other does not.

Additionally, maintaining two mowing days creates more noise and disruption during daytime memorial services. To simplify operations and make the schedule easier for families to follow, the District will transition to a single mowing day each week. **Beginning April 14, all cemetery mowing will take place on Tuesdays.**



Under the new schedule, **all memorial items must be removed prior to closing on Monday** to allow crews to safely complete mowing operations. Memorial items may be returned beginning Wednesday. **No memorial items will be permitted on the grounds at any time on Tuesdays**, as mowing will occur throughout the cemetery that day. While mowing will occur on Tuesdays, weed eating and other grounds maintenance will continue throughout the week, Monday through Friday.

The new schedule simplifies communication, creates a more predictable maintenance day, and reduces inconvenience for families who regularly visit the cemetery. For questions about cemetery maintenance or memorial item guidelines, visitors are encouraged to contact the Coachella Valley Public Cemetery District office at (760) 398-3221.

UNDERSTANDING GROUND POLICY: Canopies

Why Canopies Are Not Permitted:

Families occasionally ask why canopies are not permitted on District grounds. While shade and comfort are important during visits and services, canopies can unintentionally create risks in a cemetery setting. The metal legs of many canopies are often placed on or near headstones, which can scratch or mark the stone surfaces.

Canopies also require a larger footprint, which may extend into neighboring memorial spaces or areas reserved for other families. To help protect existing headstones and ensure that all memorial spaces are respected, the District does not allow canopies. Umbrellas, however, are permitted and provide a simple way to create shade without risking damage or encroaching on surrounding areas.

