

ORANGE COUNTY TRIBUNE

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The Tribune

\$1.5 million for Mendez project



ARTIST'S RENDERING of Mendez Plaza.

The City of Westminster and the Orange County Department of Education will receive \$1.5 million from State Sen. Tom Umberg in a check presentation event on Tuesday to assist in the completion of the Mendez Freedom Trail.

The event will be held at 1:30 p.m. at the location of the Mendez Tribute Monument Park at the intersection of Westminster Boulevard and Olive Street in Westminster, and will feature remarks by City of Westminster Mayor and City Council, Sen. Umberg, civil rights leader Sylvia Mendez, and more. Because the park is currently under construction, the check presentation event is invitation-only and will not be opened to the public.



The City's Mendez Program consists of two project efforts: Mendez Tribute Monument Park and Mendez Freedom Trail. The new park and trail honor the legacy of the historic Mendez v. Westminster case, which notably led to the desegregation of California's public schools. The park will feature statues of students holding books to symbolize the 5,000 children represented in the Mendez class-action lawsuit, as well as planned statues of Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez that will be created by renowned sculptor Ignacio Gomez.

"I'm incredibly proud to support a project in my district as significant and important to California and the country," Umberg said. "This funding will help generations of people for years to come learn about this important part of history."

Mendez v. Westminster, which preceded the more well-known 1954 Brown v. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court decision, started in the 1940s when Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez wanted to send their children to 17th Street School, which was designated for white children. But the Mendez family, who were Westminster residents and U.S. citizens of Hispanic descent, were denied and instructed to send their kids to the nearby "Mexican school," Hoover Elementary.

The denial led the Mendezes and other Mexican-American families to challenge the segregation in court. By 1947, a U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision ruled in favor of the families, which helped end segregation of California schools.

The case helped pave the way for the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, but then went largely unnoticed until more recently, thanks to the civil rights activism of Sylvia Mendez, one of the Mendez children. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2011.

"We thank Senator Umberg for his help in providing generous funding of this important project in the City of Westminster," Mayor Ta said. "The Mendez Historic Freedom Trail will always be a symbol for striving to do the right thing for all people."

The Mendez Freedom Trail project will include four interactive stations along Hoover Street. The 2-mile project will introduce safety enhancements to the Hoover Street Corridor with the installation of a protected bikeway, safety improvements near schools, and pedestrian crossings. The Orange County Department of Education has partnered with the City of Westminster to develop content and curriculum for the City's Mendez Program.

"Mendez v. Westminster was not just important for a city or a county, but our entire country," Orange County Superintendent Dr. Al Mijares said. "We hope that our collaboration can unify others in the belief that every child deserves a quality education and that every person deserves dignity and respect."