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GUATEMALA

FIRST PERSON Mayor's Fresh Energy Renews Town

His leadership is marked by a focus on education and better governance



Mayor Selvin Garcia of Pachalúm, Guatemala, is highly regarded nationally and internationally for his innovative municipal leadership.

“We are appreciative of USAID assistance in management tools that allow us to foster and grow transparency in local governance,” said Mayor Selvin Garcia, of Pachalúm, Guatemala.

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Selvin Boanerges Garcia Velásquez is the mayor of the municipality of Pachalúm, in the Department of Quiché's southeastern corner. This department was one of the most heavily affected areas during the armed conflict that ended with the 1996 Peace Accords. The municipality, mostly Ladino (referring to persons of mixed European and American Indian ancestry, mostly mixed Maya-Spanish ancestry), has a population of about 11,000 persons, with an estimated additional 3,000 living abroad, mainly in New Jersey.

Garcia has won national and international recognition for dynamic leadership of both the municipality he is running and the municipal movement. He led the effort to organize a “mancomunidad”, a municipal association consisting of eight adjacent municipalities. The association's purpose is to coordinate development plans and multiyear investment plans such that security, basic health and education services, and economic growth are enhanced simultaneously in each of the distinct municipalities and in the overall region.

With assistance from a USAID decentralization and local governance program, Garcia has introduced modern management tools for integrated financial management and transparent procurement, and methods for increased citizen participation. He has modernized communication with constituencies using interactive radio to reach out to far flung communities and a Web site to maintain contact with his constituents that have emigrated north.

The mayor is keenly interested in local level education reforms and uses municipal funds to subsidize educational infrastructure and books, and even to pay teacher salaries — a uniquely innovative approach in Guatemala. Under his leadership, Pachalúm has built and opened a technical institute that students of surrounding municipalities attend who otherwise would not have access to secondary school.

Thanks to Garcia's leadership, Pachalúm is also one of the safest municipalities in El Quiché Department, mostly free of juvenile gangs that are growing in many other municipalities.