

# CFO of the Year honoree: Donna Silva of San Juan Water District

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When [Donna Silva](#) decided to take on the role of CFO for the San Juan Water District in 2015, the organization was in a state of fluctuation, and she was tasked with mending its history of financial troubles.

“When I came on board there had been six finance directors in the past three years,” Silva said. “They were in the middle of an accounting system conversion, and were a year behind in bank reconciliations, six months behind in transaction reporting, had nine different bank accounts and couldn’t pay bills without getting a resolution from the board of directors. There was no trust in the department — it was a mess.”

Although Silva knew that organizing this type of chaos wouldn’t be easy, she felt confident that she could turn it around, having previously served as CFO for the city of Rancho Cordova for eight years. She began a systematic approach to the recovery, starting first with building trust among board members.

“I gained their trust by talking to them about my ideas on how to streamline,” Silva said. “I was very honest about the conditions that things were in and kept them updated. Sharing information creates trust. As long as you can be transparent, people will start to trust you.”

“I think she’s got the trust of the board in a significant way,” said board director [Dan Rich](#). “She’s managed to give us succinct updates on a frequent basis to the point that we have no concerns over any of the financials of the district.”

Rich added that when Silva started, she took ownership of the company’s new accounting system and made it work. “It launched flawlessly,” he said. “The district owes a lot to Donna.”



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Donna Silva of the San Juan Water District

Soon after she started, Silva made it clear that her ideas for improving the company would be no small task. "I think people were afraid to propose big change," she said. "I took the view that in order to be successful, there has to be big change. So, let's start by changing ordinances and tackling things that made us inefficient."

The payoff of chipping away at various changes over time paid off. "Now we're down to one bank account," Silva said. "We're streamlined and have two different reserves, down from 28. We have a five-year rate plan, we've been adopting budgets on time, we're getting the Government Finance Officers Association award for our budget, and we are operating smoothly."

Silva also stressed that turning the company around has been a team effort, and that her leadership approach is rooted in nurturing the success of her staff. "It has always been important to me to focus on development, training and work-life balance," she said. "I tell my staff, 'look, when we need to push, we're going to push, but then you're going to take a vacation, you're going to take care of yourself, because this is only part of your life.'"

Now, as she looks to the water district's future, Silva's focus is on retail service.

"Now that we've gotten the house in order, so to speak, we are shifting gears from being reactive to being proactive, and I find that really exciting," she said. "When you do it right, you save everybody money in the long run."

## ABOUT DONNA

**Age:** 49

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in business economics, University of California Santa Barbara

**Short description of your company:** The San Juan Water District provides surface water on a wholesale basis to Citrus Heights, Fair Oaks, Orangevale, a portion of the city of Folsom and the unincorporated area of Granite Bay. It also serves as the retail water provider for Granite Bay.

**Best part of being a CFO:** "Having a bird's eye view of the whole organization and being able to effect positive change on a large scale."

**Worst part:** "Feeling responsible for the financial success of the organization can be quite stressful at times."

**Biggest challenge you've faced:** "Nineteen years ago I quit smoking for the third time. The first two times were pretty easy, but the third time? Probably the hardest thing I've ever done."

**Advice to those entering the field:** "Always leave a good documentation trail in your work and take advantage of every opportunity to learn, grow and advance in your career."

**Fantasy career:** "Professional musician"

**Top item on your bucket list:** "Spend some time in Europe."

**Something about you that would surprise people:** "While I enjoy it immensely, I'm actually not that good at math. Thank goodness for my 10 fingers and my calculator!"

**What are the top three qualities a CFO needs?:** Analytical, communication, ability to quickly transition between details and big picture