

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Gila Valley Community Town Hall

September 10, 2021 – Eastern Arizona College, Thatcher, AZ

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Generally speaking, we work well together as a community. And, we have a good reputation for being a safe community with responsive law enforcement. While there are always areas for improvement, there is good access to health care with a strong regional hospital, which includes hospital administration who serve the community well. We also have a good supply of dentists.

We have strong non-profits who work together to serve the community, help to maintain a beautiful environment, and act as economic drivers for the community. We have a great natural environment with clean air, beautiful surroundings, and clear, dark skies that support the Mount Gram International Observatory.

Overall, when it comes to parks and recreation our community works together well and is responding better to the different needs of today's children and teenagers.

For a community of our size, our educational opportunities are strong. We have good teachers with high expectations and opportunities for lifelong learning. Eastern Arizona College allows for educational opportunities and support that attract business and economic development. Nonetheless, there are opportunities for improvement, especially for children who are not able to attend pre-school.

As a region we are getting better at responding to the concerns of minorities and tribal communities, although there is still room for improvement.

CURRENT EVENTS AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

The pandemic highlighted and exacerbated disparities with access to broadband and education. Schools that had more resources were better able to pivot to more effective online learning. Schools with less resources fell behind as did students and families who did not have access to the internet.

Lack of broadband affects education. It also affects safety, access to care, work opportunities, and access to needed services. Broadband and the ability to effectively use it has become an essential luxury.

It has become increasingly more difficult to operate in our current world without access to broadband. The pandemic has motivated our leaders to take action to make it more available and reliable. Federal funding and community leaders becoming better informed of the immediate need for broadband should allow us to begin to correct these inequities and better prepare for the future.

The pandemic created challenges with access to healthcare. It highlighted disparities in access to healthcare systems, including disparities between rural and urban areas. An unintended consequence of HIPAA was that people didn't know who might have COVID and were unable to effectively respond in some instances. There were also challenges created when families could not visit or communicate with loved ones.

While there were many community conversations and some disagreements over how to respond to the pandemic, the ability of our community to work together and cooperate with each other allowed us to be more resilient respond more quickly and effectively to the many challenges faced through the pandemic.

WHAT I WOULD TELL ARIZONA'S ELECTED LEADERS

Local governments need to better advocate at the federal level to bring greater investment to our communities. This would include applying for grants and an approach that includes a specific local plan

for the need being addressed, whether its broadband, education, transportation, affordable housing, youth programs, or employment opportunities for our youth.

Volunteerism is huge in this community. Perhaps we can form regional focus groups that can meet, share information, and then provide our elected leaders with specific guidance from the community for community investment. With respect to community investment, it's important to consider sustainability—especially if the initial funding is a one-time investment. Broadband may be one of the investment opportunities where one-time funding from the federal government would be very beneficial. This may also help support economic development and the creation of new job opportunities for our youth that would keep them here locally.

State leaders should consider our unique needs. This includes providing a larger percentage of the transaction privilege tax (TPT) that comes from the mining operations within our community but that often doesn't come back to benefit our community. Also, wildcat subdivisions create a lot of issues within our communities for infrastructure, parks and recreation, environmental quality, transportation, safety, and quality of life. The state government should allow the county government to have more authority in managing and developing subdivisions.

Government should be here to help us—not to create challenges or burdens that help Maricopa County to the detriment of our local community and that do not allow us to use money in the ways we know will best serve our community.

TAKING ACTION

The most important actions we can take to make our community more healthy and vibrant include:

1. Addressing our housing issues:
 - a. Create a private-public-non-profit partnership to create affordable and workforce housing.
 - b. Have a local town hall to address housing.
2. Preserving our environment: Work to create a better more vibrant Gila River (Bill will work with others and needs helpers).

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions during the Gila Valley Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Contact Arizona Community Foundation about affordable housing.
- Continue pushing donations to Graham Greenlee Tax Credit Coalition (GGTCC).
- Teach students about scholarship opportunities.
- Be active in local politics.
- Support my local nonprofit organizations.
- Continue river work in order to create a better vibrant river.
- Engage Eastern Arizona College students!
- Continue to attend community events and meetings to identify both short-term and long-term needs of the Gila Valley.
- Advocate for funding and action to be take in support of those needs.

- Volunteer time to assist Graham County and the local towns to create long-range planning goals and zoning politics to generate new jobs and housing with diversification in mind.
- Support and provide funding for youth groups and substance abuse recover and prevention.
- Work to find solutions in my community. Figure out some groups that need individual support (me).
- Do more research and get involved.
- Continue to help the communities that I serve to become sustainable.
- Focus on housing (teacher- and workforce-centric).
- 4 steps: Champion, Helpers, Timeline, Execution.
- Pursue development of: homeless respite center (host a town hall); Graham County Historical Society Museum; renovation of Wet Canyon and Noon Creek (host a town hall); emergency preparedness at the county level; low cost housing (host a town hall); improve communications.
- Increase discussion on furthering the expansion of broadband throughout the Gila Valley.
- Speak with Chamber staff to discuss the opportunity of creating focus groups.
- Be more involved in my community.
- Become more aware of where I am most needed to help my community become more vibrant.