



Apache Junction Community Town Hall

Friday, September 15, 2017

On September 15, 2017, diverse residents of Apache Junction gathered to consider the future of their community. The Apache Junction Community Town Hall was facilitated in partnership with the Arizona Town Hall using a consensus-based process. The report below represents the consensus of participants.

Apache Junction's unique attributes and economic strengths.

Apache Junction is a close-knit community with a small town feel. Residents come together and support each other when needed. We have great nonprofit organizations and some very involved citizens. We could be even stronger by involving more of our retirees in our community, including within our schools. We are also lucky to have great police and fire services as well as a great parks and recreation department. Our leaders are open to the community and involved.

Apache Junction has a unique natural beauty with the Superstition Mountains as a backdrop and great attractions like the Apache Trail. Simply put, it is the most beautiful area in the Valley. The "Wild West" and historic appeal of Apache Junction is an attraction for visitors from around the world. It is also appealing to retirees. The openness and beauty of our natural surroundings make Apache Junction a great place to live or visit.

We need to preserve this natural beauty and preserve the feel of the Wild West by working with neighboring communities and with state land. We should consider creating more natural walkways and maybe even public transportation that builds on our Wild West feel, such as horse drawn carriages.

Unfortunately, misperceptions abound that can overshadow these great attributes. People mistakenly believe that there are homeless or crime problems here that do not exist. We need to better market the attributes, strengths and appeal of Apache Junction so that these misperceptions do not impede our ability to bring in tourists and economic growth. The seasonality of our population also creates challenges. The local economy in the summer can be difficult for small businesses. We should consider ways to create a stronger year-round economy.

While some people are drawn to the area because of the ability to have fewer government restrictions on their property, we need to balance these desires with the need to create an appealing environment. Businesses and homes that are in poor repair have a negative impact on tourism and economic growth. Creating incentives to make needed repairs

or otherwise beautify businesses and homes would help ensure a better economic future for our city as would modernizing our downtown while maintaining the feel of the Wild West.

We should also consider community activities and venues that provide greater opportunities for our youth. This will allow us to attract more young families.

Building a Strong Economy

Apache Junction needs a new image--an identity or brand that can help us market our assets and grow our economy. We should all stop talking about negative perceptions and instead work on creating messaging about our positive assets and our potential for creating a stronger and more diverse economy with higher wage employers.

Historically, we encouraged retirees to move here. Unfortunately, we now have part-time residents who do not pay taxes to support the services that our community desperately needs, especially our schools. Our kids are our future. We need to find a way to balance the needs of our future with the needs of our part-time residents. We should consider a potential tax that would remedy this problem.

Making our downtown more walkable and identifiable would help draw visitors to the downtown area. This could include signage or other identifiable markers that help define and brand the area.

We could also encourage neighborhoods and areas to come together and make their areas more identifiable and beautiful. As we take these actions, we need to also address the eyesores and buildings that are falling apart and that detract from these efforts.

We need to attract diverse business to expand our economy. We should consider a study or research of where we have leakages of businesses and economic opportunities. This will allow us to better plan for the future. We should also look at creating a hub or business corridor for low tech industries, perhaps south of the 60 or near where the 60 intersects with SR24. We should incentivize manufacturing businesses to come here as they provide higher wage jobs that benefit our economy. One of our challenges is our tax rates for these business which we should look at reducing.

We need more events such as Lost Dutchman Days, or Country Thunder that attract families and youth. Activities for families and youth are critical. More town halls for high school and college students would be good. We should also consider a visitor's center, or perhaps an entertainment complex that makes the city a destination place. Recreation facilities that are open and accessible to the public can bring in more business while providing resources to our citizens. Any new facilities should identify with the city's western theme.

We should consider new ways to draw in visitors to Apache Junction--ideas like petitioning to have the state fair here in Apache Junction. We should also explore ways to secure grants to help finance these ideas.

Maximizing Educational Opportunities

Education plays a critical role in creating a bright future for our community. Good schools attract high wage employers and families.

There is a big division between our community and our schools. We need to remedy this problem. We need to better connect our schools and our community so that we work together to create a community with a positive message and great opportunities for everyone—especially our youth, who do not feel supported.

Community residents could volunteer with the schools. In turn, students could volunteer in the community. These service projects could go a long way to connect our students and other members of the community.

Our students need more support to maximize their potential. They need to have more opportunities for arts, afterschool activities and other events that inspire them to come to school. Simply put, they need to feel supported. Because they do not feel supported, they are not inspired to excel and it shows in the levels of academic achievement and student enrollment.

Good teachers are the most important component of good schools. Recruiting and retaining teachers has become a significant challenge for our K-12 system—in large part because we don't pay them well and they are overworked. Our teachers can walk out the door and immediately make thousands more per year in nearby communities.

Our schools need additional funding so that they can attract and keep teachers with competitive pay and benefits. Our schools also need funding for facilities. Some classes, for example, do not even have air conditioning.

More transparency between the schools and the community about how funds are spent would help the community to better understand funding needs and, hopefully, to support our schools as needed. The community also needs to better understand how stressed and challenged our educators and our students are due to a lack of resources and a perception that the community does not support them.

On the other hand, EVIT (East Valley Institute of Technology) and CAC (Central Arizona College) are great resources for learning trades and for supporting Apache Junction's students. We should continue to support and grow these partnerships. We need to get our kids to envision their future before they start high school so they will be inspired to do their best. As part of this effort, we need to educate parents about the importance of education, including quality pre-K education that sets the foundation for a lifetime of good educational experiences.

To address these challenges, we should grow from within to create the educational and other opportunities that we seek to have. We also should consider a rental tax on trailer lots for part-time residents that would help provide need funding for our public school system.

OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Apache Junction has access to great natural resources, including the Superstition and Goldfield Mountains, and Apache Trail. We also have access to lakes, a lot of great hiking and horseback riding trails as well as resources for jeep riding.

We could work with the state to leverage these assets so that more visitors to Arizona come to Apache Junction. We should work with BLM to host larger events, such as a large rodeo that would attract new visitors.

We need to continue to work with the State Land Department and BLM to create more opportunities for utilizing our natural resources while also being cognizant of protecting the environment. We should collaborate more as a community to support the events we have and to support new events. For example, Flat Iron Park could be used for more festivals and to promote the city center.

We should better promote our resources and events with more signage and advertising. More trees, additional parking at popular sites (such as Silly Mountain) and perhaps an attractive visitors center or rest stops could bring in more visitors. We also need more code enforcement or other methods of reducing unattractive and unsightly areas.

All community members should work collaboratively to support these efforts, including our local chamber members.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The City has a Citizen Leadership Institute. We should open this up for more students to participate. We should also have city officials go to the schools to meet with youth councils. This would encourage students to become more involved in the city. We should also consider a parallel program with CAC for paraprofessionals.

We should consider a Key Club at the high school that would promote engagement with youth in the community

Residents need to feel that they are listened to. We should have more gatherings like this Community Town Hall (perhaps once or twice a year) so the community can weigh in on issues and provide ideas and potential solutions.

Community residents could be more involved in city meetings or on community boards. We should consider having term limits on boards to encourage fresh blood and more community engagement. Events like this gathering today or apps that provide reminders from the city would encourage people to be more engaged. Livestreaming city council meetings might also allow more people to be involved. It would also help if city council members were able to attend meetings in neighborhoods where their decisions will have an impact.

City communications could be improved and the website can be made easier to navigate. These improvements would also help with engagement as would concerts in the park and other similar community events.

A volunteer site to match up volunteers with needs (like a match.com for Apache Junction) would also be a good way to promote positive engagement.

SETTING PRIORITIES

It is imperative that we rebrand and better market Apache Junction. While the City's Public Relations department should take the lead, the school district and our youth should also be involved. We may need to hire an outside consultant to assist but we can all begin now by engaging in positive communications about Apache Junction.

The community needs to come together to learn about and help improve our schools. This includes more funding for our schools. We need to consider bonds, a visitor's tax or other means of increasing revenue. We should look to the community to volunteer to help with needs, such as grass for the playgrounds and other items that the community can step up and provide. In addition, we should have a coalition of City officials, schools and community members come together to create a program to mentor our youth.

To improve economic development, we should create a visitor's center right off the highway. This would help to promote Apache Junction. The chamber, the City and maybe the state (if it is also a rest area) would be the responsible parties. We should also work to incorporate BLM land into city efforts because it is underutilized. The mayor, city council and state representatives should work on this goal. We should also work to incorporate county islands and incentivize development of these islands. The city and the state are the responsible parties.

Transportation and infrastructure are also important. The new North South corridor will bring in revenue through business development. Private coalitions and the City are the responsible parties who can make this happen.

Community events like this can also help expand business opportunities and improve communications between City staff, officials and members of the community. A Saturday event would allow more working class members of our community to be involved.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions at the Community Town Hall. Some of the ideas shared are set forth below:

I WILL...

- Be more involved in city happenings.
- Initiate and participate in talking about youth encouragement, spirit and engagement.
- Become more involved in local government, i.e. serving on boards commissions or running for office.
- Work on improving transportation
- Be available for future town halls

- Be involved in education issues and work on partnerships and regional issues
- Support local schools and their programs such as youth council groups.
- Do my best to make people aware of the real issues we have in Apache Junction.
- Steer clear of negative talk about this beautiful town.
- Continue to help educate the community and work on collaborative efforts with others in advertising.
- Volunteer my time at AJUSD to find out where I can help.
- Continue to engage stakeholders in finding solutions to improve the public school system in Apache Junction.
- Increase my involvement in my community.
- Gather the ideas of my immediate community and bring it to the community as a whole.
- Continue to be involved in my city and schools to bring positive change.
- Reach out to fellow youth
- Provide these ideas to the youth Advisory council
- Go to a Gold Canyon Council meeting
- Involve student is the community by enlisting them for various events
- Continue to educate myself by being engaged with my neighborhood and community—connecting all neighbors to empower change for the betterment of Apache junction.
- Help support the youth in our community to be involved and show ownership
- Research how other tourist town generate funds from seasonal visitors (Siesta Key 12% bed tax)
- Strive to be a good ambassador of the city and make sure that I push forward a positive image of the city and work to correct misperceptions
- Get more involved in City Council meetings.
- Be an advocate for our community.
- Encourage growth and opportunity!
- Support public education.
- Go to more Board meetings.
- Focus on improving the involvement of youth in City matters.
- Support the community
- Engage with community.
- Continue to be an advocate for the community in events taking place.
- Ensure that the community is informed of events and programs through Facebook groups.
- Continue to speak positively about Apache Junction, volunteer, and be active in the community to help make AJ the town I know it can be.
- Speak more positively of our town.
- Encourage locals to shop local
- Volunteer in the community.
- Explore and attend city events and activities.
- Just get involved.