

# DAILY MINER

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## Arizona Town Hall offers reform points to ponder

*Good, bad, ugly of state government identified*

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KINGMAN - The nearly 100 members of the 97th Arizona Town Hall and the public share the same opinion of state government that changes need to be made.

Arizona Town Hall is an independent, nonprofit organization that identifies issues facing Arizona and then explores two of those issues and their possible solutions each year with a group of about 100 Arizona politicians, teachers, business leaders, college students and regular citizens. The last Arizona Town Hall was held in November and dealt with the next 100 years of Arizona government.

The president of Arizona Town Hall, Tara Jackson, was in Kingman Thursday to present the findings of the group.

"The group identified some of the good, the bad and the ugly in state government," Jackson said.

The good was the judicial system, she said. Judges for the state appeals courts and for courts in counties with a population greater than 250,000 are chosen and recommended to the governor based on a merit system, she said.

The town hall members identified the "bad" as the Legislature and the "ugly" as the level of uncivil dialogue going on in the state, she said. But the group had 10 recommendations for all levels of state government.

No term limits

The first, Jackson said, was electing the best people for the job. Arizonans need to attract the best people to run for office by eliminating or extending term limits, creating more competitive districts, reforming or repealing the Clean Elections system, and increasing legislative salaries.

By eliminating or extending term limits, legislators would have the time to gain experience and develop relationships, she said.

Some in the audience disagreed with the idea of ending term limits. Jackson said extending limits instead of abolishing them could help the situation.



JC AMBERLYN/Miner

Tom Duranceau makes a point as Cathy Ott stands by during an Arizona Town Hall meeting at Mohave County Administration Building Thursday.

Creating more competitive districts during this year's redistricting process would also attract better lawmakers by making them more responsive to the state's changing political climate, she said.

The Clean Elections law was a big topic of discussion by the town hall members, Jackson said. The system provides matching funds for people who want to run for office but may not be able to raise the same amount of funds as their opponents. The system has come under fire in the last few years and a lawsuit challenging its constitutionality is set to go before the U.S. Supreme Court this week.

The system was fraught with problems, according to town hall members, who recommended either reforming it or repealing it, she said.

The second major recommendation the town hall made was to "empower government to solve problems by seeking out best practices," she said. This included re-examining Arizona's tax structure to create a more balanced and stable system; eliminating the super majority requirement in the Legislature to raise taxes; raise or eliminate the \$350,000 debt limit, which is not enforced or reasonable; and end unfunded mandates and sweeps of local government funds by the Legislature.

These items work together, Jackson said. By allowing the state Legislature the flexibility to raise revenue, by fixing the tax system and eliminating the super majority vote, the state would not have to borrow or sweep funds from local governments or voter initiative projects.

She agreed that the Legislature should not be able to raise taxes indiscriminately, but in difficult times it needed to have some flexibility to raise revenue.

The third major recommendation by the group was to reform and reorganize the executive branch, Jackson said. They suggested that people be appointed based on merit and qualifications to the positions of mine inspector, superintendent of education and state treasurer; that the position of lieutenant governor, without elections duties, be created; and that the executive branch should come up with a long-range plan for the future of the state.

"We have a quite a few positions that are held by elected officers that don't need to be elected positions," she said. Some of those positions are held by members of different political parties, which makes it difficult for the different departments to work together.

The position of Lt. governor would eliminate some of the problems the state has had when a governor has left office and had to be replaced, Jackson said. She believes the issue failed on the November ballot because the secretary of state's duties to oversee elections was included in the position.

### Selecting judges

The fourth major recommendation by the town hall was to support Arizona's judicial branch, Jackson said. This would be accomplished by expanding the merit selection process to all counties, establishing a stable funding source for the courts, abolishing the mandatory retirement age of 70, increasing training for the justices of the peace, and better informing the public on how the courts work.

The fifth recommendation made by the town hall was to reform the state constitutional amendment process, she said.

"We've had more than 100 amendments in the last 100 years - that's too many, according to constitutional scholars. We've got to make it harder to amend," Jackson said. Some of the amendments made to the state constitution could have easily been made to the state statutes, she said.

The town hall's sixth major recommendation was to develop a long-term plan for the future of the state, Jackson said. It recommended creating a strategic planning commission to look at the future of education,

business, taxes, water and technology in the state.

The seventh major recommendation was to refocus government priorities on education and economic development.

"The state's highest priorities must be education and jobs," Jackson said.

Another major recommendation by the town hall members was to increase transparency in government. This could be done by using the latest technology to connect people to their government, revising the Open Meeting Laws to include all actions by the Legislature, and by providing a 72-hour notice between the posting of a proposed budget and its approval by the Legislature.

The last two major recommendations from the town hall dealt with cooperation between the different levels of government and increasing public involvement in the government process. All levels of government need to work together to achieve the common good for all Arizonans, Jackson said.

"The responsibility for good government does not just reside in the halls of the capitol. Ultimately, we the people are the government," she said. "We have the ability to shape the state's existence for the next 100 years."

Kingman Mayor John Salem and Councilwoman Janet Watson were both part of this year's town hall.

Salem said he had never seen anything like it.

"To get four groups of about 25 people to sit in a room and agree or disagree on something is really difficult," he said. But the members of the town hall were able to come to a consensus, not necessarily a universal agreement on most items. He disagreed with the idea of appointing people to state executive offices.

The experience taught him how to be patient with other's opinions and feelings, Salem said. "It's made me a better representative of the people."

The full Arizona Town Hall report and more information on the organization can be found at [www.aztownhall.org](http://www.aztownhall.org).

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