

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

**SEAGO Virtual Community Town Hall
November 20, 2020 – Online via Zoom**

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the four counties in Southeast Arizona, there are a number of strong community elements present that keep our area resilient despite the tough year we are experiencing with the current pandemic and national concerns. In general, there is sufficient access to quality affordable food in the area. In the community of Bisbee, there are steps to provide outreach support services from local volunteers and organizations to help their neighbors and decrease food waste. Willcox has groups that have come together and prioritized accessible food pantries for providing food to those in need. There is significant social and cultural cohesion in the region with collaboration between different segments of the population. There is economic opportunity with large employers, although driving some distance to work is necessary. Cochise College helps with providing an educated workforce in the region with different vocational and academic options for residents.

Access to care, however, is a challenge. There are healthcare facilities, but often higher access to care requires traveling to another location, which causes stress with patients and their families. One community has focused on advocacy for seniors and the disabled population to provide better access to care and has done so through C.A.R.E.S. Act funding and working with the hospitals and city governments. Community health improvement plans in one area discovered a capacity issue with people able to solve issues at the community level. This finding helped create the Cochise Leadership Capacity, a nine-week course, which has led to bring community members together to become leaders and to create solutions to problematic issues. City government, such as the Willcox government, has prioritized economic development and increasing opportunities for jobs, the arts, and opportunities for youth.

Housing, however, has become more of an area of concern due to gentrification and stratification in some communities. Residents with fixed incomes have no elasticity in their purchasing power and have reached a crisis mode for their basic needs. In Bisbee, there is underutilized property, which is an issue, and is being addressed in various ways.

There are cross-border activities with Mexico, which have engaged communities, and have benefited both sides of the border. Engaging the region's population with neighboring Sonora has helped engage our communities. Economic development has been an area of focus throughout the years. The pandemic has had a negative effect on all communities in this area. Through government funding, a number of businesses have been helped. Communities that have historically depended on tourism had to virtually shut down during the pandemic, but with assistance are slowing coming back.

Overall, Southeast Arizona is located in a beautiful environment, which provides rivers, mountains, the desert, and great weather that residents appreciate.

CURRENT EVENTS AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

The pandemic has had significant impact the communities in Southeastern Arizona. Communities have had to decrease services and, in some cases, close services such as parks, public restrooms, and events.

There is concern that students are falling behind in education and may lose a year or more in schooling and their overall development. In particular in rural areas, there is a lack of regular, stable access to the internet and educational services so necessary for learning during the pandemic. In some circumstances, schools have not developed a well-designed educational experience and have lost enrollment to other entities. The adaptation to distance schooling has had a mental health impact on youngsters due to the lack of a social life outside of home and the instability of education access.

This level of stress has also reached families and our aged population. Older adults may not have experience interacting with technology and don't know how to access services, which causes stress and social isolation. Bringing younger students and the older population together is a possible solution to help bridge the technology gap.

However, people are scared to go outside. The pandemic has created an overall mental health situation, which has stressed the entire population.

TAKING ACTION

This area has a board that has helped develop a roadmap with action items that include many elements of the vibrant communities wheel. In Bisbee, the library has served the community in several ways as a disseminator of information from various services that assist the community with mental health, stress, education information, and more. It is important that residents know that in this difficult time, it is okay to reach out for help. Our governments and other organizations can assist people with classes and information on health cooking, mental health, and other areas to build self-resiliency.

The Council on Aging helps with resources for older adults. The more information that can be shared, the better this council can help the elderly. Bringing younger students and the elderly together is an action that can help with resiliency for both of these groups.

We should look back on the pandemic experience to better prepare ourselves to address future challenges. Some areas hit significantly by the pandemic included healthcare, transportation, and education.

People need to feel more connected. The pandemic has isolated residents even though they appreciate their independence. Economic opportunities can be made more visible and enable businesses to connect as well. The SEAGO Economic Advisory Council creates a platform and a space for developers to connect and share information about resources and training. Open dialogue and supporting each other is essential. We all can help. The entire community needs to identify and bridge the gaps that exist.

Communities and organizations have searched for and found funding for projects that help our communities and also put people to work. Some examples include housing and sidewalk improvements.

We are learning from crises created by the pandemic and can move forward. SEAGO's strategic planning efforts can help Southeast Arizona going into the future and find and be the helpers for all of our communities.

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 SEAGO Virtual Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Assist with the reopening of a community development center.
- Build in individual self-reliance and resiliency using government resources/funding.
- Become a Cochise Leadership Academy mentor/cohort, continue working with nonprofits, and help build ground up community resiliency.
- Keep applying for monetary support for nonprofits I am associated with.
- Lead by example. Instead of working for "A" community, work with ALL communities.
- Make myself more available through phone calls, going on site, working with the mayor and council and other departments and community members.

- Advocate for the senior population and do my best not to get dragged down by negativity (political or otherwise).
- Continue the work I already do and double-down on the efforts.
- Continue to help in what ways I can like picking up groceries for seniors and others.
- Strategize where funding is best applied to help low-income families (like for sports, devices, internet, etc.).
- Volunteer more in community and be more visible.
- We have an excellent aging council with 17 members who are active in their communities and bring back information that has been shared with them. I will give those members additional information to take back to their communities and connect youth with seniors.