

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Sierra Vista Virtual Community Town Hall

April 29, 2021 – Online via Zoom

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Social cohesion is a real strength of the Sierra Vista community. The first thing you see when driving into Sierra Vista is the array of signs featuring the many service clubs active in the community. These groups are emblematic of the spirit of compassion and caring that characterizes Sierra Vista. The Legacy Foundation of Southeast Arizona is another example of this culture of compassion and has generously funded grants that support many community needs. When we have common goals, communicate, and work together, even things that at first appear impossible can be accomplished. This is especially true when people come together in times of emergency or crisis, such as after a fire or flood.

Although Sierra Vista is strong in these areas, it could do even better by reaching out to more people in the community. However cohesive the community may consider itself to be, there are segments that do not feel included, including people of color, people in rural areas, LGBTQ+, and people who are not native English speakers. The community could be even better if efforts were made to reach out to include those who may feel left out and assure that everyone's voice is heard.

One lesson learned from COVID-19 is that it is possible to include more people in regular meetings via online platforms. Leaders are making exceedingly difficult decisions on new issues in a context that requires community input. Ideally, meetings should be inclusive and engage the public in these decisions in a constructive way.

For a rural community, the health care system in Sierra Vista is of an extremely high standard, although improvements are needed in the area of mental health care. Sierra Vista also has an especially strong parks and recreation department, with excellent programming.

The local newspaper is under threat at a time when it is desperately needed to promote civil discourse and maintain social cohesion among citizens. The region also could benefit from a volunteer lawyer or legal aid programs. Without access to legal advocates, low-income individuals are more likely to be victims of predatory practices and less likely to access needed services.

The local economy is an area that needs to be strengthened. Small, rural communities face challenges in developing good jobs, particularly jobs that are suitable for two worker families. Economic opportunities are not evenly and equitably distributed throughout the county and there is too much poverty. This lack of economic opportunity creates stress and impairs health and wellbeing. Many communities in the county could benefit from linkages to the programs and opportunities that are available in Sierra Vista.

CURRENT EVENTS AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

While Sierra Vista has been affected by COVID-19, the particulars are not universally or well understood, and there are pockets of inequitable and disparate impact. People in rural areas, communities of color, the LGBTQ+ community, people without adequate internet access or access to information especially pertaining to COVID-19, and people who could not access the vaccine all suffered disproportionately. Many students, particularly those in poverty, have fallen off the map and suffered significant setbacks in their education as well as mental health impacts.

Although the county health department and other agencies have collected information about health and social determinants of health, that information is not generally known or available within the community. It also takes time to collect and process the data. It might be helpful and cathartic to invite

people who have been impacted by COVID-19 and/or racism to come together and talk about how they have been affected.

People love living in Sierra Vista and it is a community that doesn't think it has a racism problem. Nevertheless, there are populations that feel marginalized and their voices need to be heard.

Videos of killings of Black men and women has raised the level of discussion of racism nationwide. This might be a good time to establish a new and improved diversity, equity, and inclusion commission. It would also be useful to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on county jail inmates, to look at police conduct, and to consider the need for reforms in the light of the Black Lives Matter movement. The recently formed Cochise County Public Accountability Community Engagement Transparency Liaison Committee (PACTLC) has just initiated a police accountability effort.

TAKING ACTION

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

I WILL...

- The Legacy Foundation of Southeast Arizona will consider a grant cycle to support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training in the community.
- Take this information out to the 11 Healthy Community Groups throughout the county. If you are interested in joining one of these groups, visit <http://www.healthycochise.org/> or contact Evelyn Whitmer at emarkee@arizona.edu.
- Obtain more and better data about the key issues.
- Attend city council, school board, board of supervisor, and other public meetings and share the information we obtain there widely with groups we are involved with.
- Cochise County will collaborate and help put out an Educational Concerns Survey, provide venue for feedback at the Superintendents Roundtable, Career and Technical Education Workgroups, County and Cochise College Student Advisory Council. If you are interested, please contact Jacqui Clay via email at jclay@cochise.az.gov.
- Carry the idea back to the Sierra Vista City Council establish a commission in the community on social awareness and embracing diversity.