

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Verde Valley Community Town Hall

October 8, 2021 – Yavapai College, Clarkdale, AZ

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

When we consider the Verde Valley we think of people, passion, perspective, personality, purpose, partnership, preservation, and public safety.

One of our most significant strengths is our commitment to volunteerism and collaboration. Community members donate tens of thousands of hours, and we see extensive civic engagement and strong regional organizations such as Verde Valley Regional Economic Organization. Each of our local communities have their own identities from Sedona to Cottonwood, Clarkdale, Jerome, Camp Verde, and Yavapai County.

We are a very safe community. We have access to health care even though we are a rural community. We have excellent libraries and educational resources and involvement at all levels from pre-K through our community college.

The Verde Valley has become effective at connecting people in need with the resources they need, and this was made apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we could do more to leverage the available resources.

Public transportation options, including paratransit and transportation for the elderly, are scarce and could be improved.

Parks and recreation are a strength, as is environmental quality. As a community that is close to natural parks and public resources, we do a good job of leveraging our location for recreation and tourism.

VERDE VALLEY CURRENT EVENTS AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

It has been said that we should never let a good crisis go to waste—instead we should look for opportunities to make lives better. COVID-19 has identified how interrelated our communities are and has highlighted disparities and needs which include housing, health care, broadband, sustainable food availability, and transportation.

Organizations around the Verde Valley rose to the many challenges we faced. Yavapai County Health Services established a phone bank providing access to information, testing and vaccines. Verde Valley Caregivers delivered health care services to seniors. Manzanita Outreach provided food to the community and resources to our children through local schools. Many other organizations also made major contributions.

Inequities continue to be prevalent in the Verde Valley. COVID-19 both amplified and revealed the disparities in health care, housing, and other basic services. There are diverse elements of the community whose voices have not been heard, although the increased use of Zoom and electronic media has made meetings more accessible.

Not all members of the community have access to all elements of the wheel. Different groups have different levels and means of accessing the elements on the wheel. While Zoom and electronic platforms have improved inclusiveness, communities such as Cornville and many vulnerable communities remain excluded because they do not have reliable access to broadband internet. This can lead to social isolation and lack of awareness of available resources. It also made remote health care inaccessible to those without online communication access. The move to online education further exposed the lack of internet access many of our families have. A bright spot is that Yavapai County has committed half of its CARES Act funding to expanding broadband throughout the County.

There is a shortage of health care workers that has been made worse by the pandemic. Some hospitals were so overrun by COVID-19 cases that they were unable to serve people with other conditions in need of care. The pandemic has also increased awareness of substance abuse and mental health needs in the community.

Water continues to be a major issue and drinking water remains a significant concern. Native American community needs were exposed including lack of potable water for drinking and maintaining health. More integrative water planning needs to be addressed.

The lack of affordable housing poses a huge problem and directly impacts workforce development. Many workers who need housing cannot afford to live in the community. We have exposed an increase in the number of people in the Verde Valley experiencing homelessness. Some people have moved to the outskirts and live on undeveloped land, highlighting their needs and leading to environmental and public safety issues. While all communities are working on workforce housing, Sedona and Cottonwood have selected a single joint housing leader for both communities to address these issues.

Families found themselves without adequate transportation resources. Improving the shuttle schedule also could help to relieve the problem of unavailability of rental housing in Sedona by making it more convenient for workers to commute.

WHAT I WOULD TELL ARIZONA'S ELECTED LEADERS

- We need more local control as one size does not fit all and we need to eliminate unfunded state-imposed mandates. This includes issues such as local control over short term rentals and taxes.
- Our schools are underfunded, and we should not continue to be 49th in the nation in public funding—we need better outcomes for our children and higher pay for teachers.
- We need to continue to work toward strengthening families.
- We need to embrace data driven decisions, cross the aisle, and move away from politicization.
- We need to diversify our leadership, encouraging youth and people of color to actively participate.
- We need integrated water management and planning.
- We should increase efforts to educate high school students and voters on civics and local issues and strongly encourage the importance of civic engagement through voting in primary and general elections.
- We need to see broadband communications expanding throughout all our local communities.
- The Verde Valley needs to continue to work together including the redistricting process.
- People are not always aware of resource availability—we need to have a single point of contact where people could go to be referred to the help they need.
- Funding for non-profits has been challenged by the pandemic. We need to promote and incite volunteerism and funding for non-profits that fulfill vital public services. Meals on Wheels, for example, is a vital, lifesaving service. Its costs have increased, and fundraising abilities have decreased due to COVID-19.
- The lack of affordable and workforce housing is the single biggest issue for people in this region.
- Workforce development needs to promote livable wage jobs.
- State officials should become as accessible and responsive as local officials.

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 Verde Valley Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Complete the broadband whitepaper and include PPP management opportunities.
- Energize the advocacy and research committee of VVREO as a board member.
- As president of the Cornville Community Association, I am working to bring more local residents into our organization in order to keep community involvement at a high level so that all are involved in the important decisions affecting Cornville.
- Ensure the work of Local First Arizona is always focused on the community needs and make an effort to attend similar events to hear directly from community members.
- Foster relationships and actions to leverage the full diversity of voices and talents in our region. One specific direction is a cross-sector collaboration to develop a pipeline of BIPOC leaders for conservation-related organizations and build momentum on tackling environmental justice issues.
- [Help to create] coalitions for every issue with working members.
- Be better at “Well Done” than “Well Said!”
- Continue to promote the Meals on Wheels program to Arizona’s elected officials to inform them of the real plight of the elderly. Every official should take a trip with a MOW driver and home-deliver meals.
- Update the referral list we offer to our clients to be sure we are including all available resources in the Verde Valley.
- Pay attention to the primary elections and educate myself to make good voting decisions.
- Restart teen council.
- Reach out to state elected leaders to educate.
- Be more aware of political position and priorities of individuals running for office.
- Continue to talk to a variety of members of our community, listen to their needs and try to connect them to resources and leadership and elevate their voice.
- Work to amplify the voice of rural Arizona in the legislature, especially on education issues, by facilitating testimony in Phoenix on how rural answers differ from urban answers.
- Work with my colleagues to identify ways to support Verde Valley communities in efforts to build on strengths/assets for healthy, vibrant communities.
- Find a way to get involved in the Verde Valley as a citizen.
- Find ways to create pathways in collaboration with my K-12 partners.
- Learn basic Spanish.
- Go in person to meet students and leaders of the Yavapai-Apache Nation.
- Be more public in representing Yavapai College for accessibility.
- Research solutions for affordable housing and connect with the leaders who are working on the issue.

- Continue my work as a leader in my profession as well as work to support the efforts to strengthen families and communities.
- Continue to connect our valuable adults and their experience and introspect to youth to help guide them to support our community.
- Share the Camp Verde water study and the sinkhole study.
- Work with the state land trust to educate the public on education funding.
- Work with VVREO to be a collaboration to the Valley.
- Continue to inform on the failure of our public education—now 38th—40th worldwide down from #1. Only choice will free [us] from the failure nationwide of public schools.
- I have a unique talent of bringing people together to have difficult conversations and will help create, design, and implement community conversations around difficult topics.
- Bring my expertise to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) so that people feel included at the table conversation related to Verde Valley growth.
- Actively engage with the Yavapai-Apache Nation.
- Shop local.
- Join an impactful and passionate board of directors.
- Follow up with Linda Buchannan to contribute ideas and resources to Arizona Town Hall Future Leaders initiatives.
- Visit with Arizona state legislators (representatives and senators) and Congressman Tom O'Halleran regarding the importance of "Keeping the Verde Valley Together" as well as major themes from Verde Valley Community Town Hall.