



*This year, a collaborative initiative that brings Arizona residents together to examine compelling issues hits its half-century mark. This fall's Arizona Town Hall will focus on Civic Leadership. To learn more about that—and what makes the concept work—we sat down with a few lawyers who are also Town Hall leaders: Executive Director Tara Jackson, Mary Grier (City of Phoenix), Scott Rhodes (Jennings, Strouss & Salmon), and Gregory Falls (Sherman & Howard).*

# ARIZONA TOWN HALL CELEBRATES 50 YEARS

**ARIZONA ATTORNEY:** For someone who doesn't know much about Arizona Town Hall, how do you describe the values that underlie it?

**TARA JACKSON:** One of the most important values is having respectful dialogue around difficult issues and solving problems in that way. Other values that are important are diversity of opinion and perspective, and solutions that are based on factual research and analysis.

**AZAT:** And you seek dialogue from many people?

**JACKSON:** Yes. We aim to involve all parts of Arizona—rural, urban, all different professions, political perspectives and generations.

**AZAT:** Traditionally, lawyers have always been a part of the Town Hall mix.

**JACKSON:** That's right. The organization has developed a lot of leaders over the years in the legal arena, including some of Arizona's best lawyers and judges. If you went through the judges on the federal and state appellate or U.S. District Courts here, you would see many people who went through the Town Hall process as attorneys—and who still support it.

**AZAT:** The Town Hall concept is celebrating 50 years in Arizona. Does it still resonate with people? And why?

**SCOTT RHODES:** The process is so different than what most people encounter in their lives, and that's especially true among community and political leaders. Normally decisions get made because both sides or several sides express an opinion, and at the end there's a vote and whoever has one more vote wins. This process is completely different. This is aimed at developing leadership through consensus. The right answer that's developed is the answer that everyone can agree on. People from different points of view can come together and agree on something and believe that there is a direction that can be formed as a result.

**AZAT:** Is that especially important in a presidential election year?

**JACKSON:** Yes, I think so. Part of my job is listening to communities, and everywhere I go I hear the angst and the frustration with the negativity, the polarization, the fact that people from different parties can't even seem to talk to each other. People feel frustrated and "check out."

The Town Hall process is very different from that. It gives you hope.

**AZAT:** Do you think that message resonates with lawyers?

**GREGORY FALLS:** Yes. Years ago, we were trained as lawyers to be zealous advocates for our clients, which meant I'm on one side, there's a lawyer on the other side, and we go into the courtroom and beat each other up. Then the jury or judge decides who's right, and there are winners and losers.

Over time, because many of our clients are smart people and don't want to just roll the dice, they want to find common ground if there is one. I think the skills that lawyers have that facilitate consensus-

building make them better able to give high-quality advice to their clients.

**MARY GRIER:** I would have a comparable but slightly different take on it. I think that lawyers are often used to being the ones who do the talking, and they are perceived by other people as sometimes being better arguers and having an unfair advantage when it comes to dialogue about issues. But when lawyers participate as recorders in the Town Hall, you are forced to listen very hard to what everybody in the room is saying. You have to pick up on nonverbal cues and help them navigate to common ground.

The skill is to identify common interests and help people see a path forward on a public policy issue. As Greg said, so much of what lawyers do is conflict-oriented, this is really a different experience. It's very valuable because of that.

**AZAT:** How unique is Arizona? Does every state do this?



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**JACKSON:** There are two other states that we know of that have a process very similar to ours: New Mexico and Oklahoma. Both model their process after the Arizona Town Hall. I'm not aware of any others.

**AZAT:** What are the Town Hall topics this year?

**JACKSON:** The spring Town Hall topic was Civic Engagement, and the fall Town Hall will be on Civic Leadership.

**AZAT:** As I look back at all of the fantastic topics you've done over the years, there are some broad areas—like this year—and there are more specific—like energy resources or how we pick our judges. Is one more difficult to manage than the other?

**RHODES:** I would say that the narrow topics are easy to define. They're easy to set up the outline for discussion because they're kind of black and white. But probably for the participants the broader subjects mean more, because they really come with their ideas and they leave with gratification of new thoughts. So I would say that for the participants the broader topics are probably a better experience.

**AZAT:** How do you move from moderated, freewheeling discussions to a bound book of consensus?

**JACKSON:** I will tell you that that's a real art, and sitting here are the artists that help the most. First of all, we ask all the participants, what do you want to talk about on this topic? Then the Training Committee Chair and Vice Chair—right now it's Greg and Mary—develop the questions. They need to be designed to help people achieve consensus, through which they're going to want to work together over two and a half days, not where you're pitting them against

each other. The questions have to be designed to encourage creative thinking and new ideas.

**AZAT:** Let's talk for a few minutes about the nuts and bolts. What does a recorder do?

**GRIER:** (speaking to a training seminar for lawyer-recorders): The recorder's role is primarily to listen, think and write. You have to multitask. You are trying to capture not necessarily specific words. You're there to get at the essence of what people are saying, the common ground in their ideas and thoughts. You're also watching the body language and trying to get at what's really going on here. How can I tease out of all the words and get an unbiased consensus statement that the group would generally agree with? While you're taking notes, you're kind of crafting a statement.

All the things that are [a lawyer's] strengths—your knowledge of words, your ability to listen and think, your ability to write and to deal effectively under pressure—are wonderful qualities that make you an asset to this process.

**RHODES:** The actual Town Hall has 150 to 170 participants, usually divided into five panels, and each one is given a separate room. But they're not off doing their own thing; before that happens, the Training Committee has taken the research materials, reviewed them, taken all the questions we've received from participants, and melded them into a series of questions. There are four sessions all together—two on Monday, two on Tuesday—and in each session, each panel is discussing the same questions at the same time.



Mary Grier, City of Phoenix

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Scott Rhodes,  
Jennings, Strouss & Salmon

That's what gets us to the recorders.

You have a panel chair who is trained to be neutral, to not give any signals as to what he or she thinks the right answer is but to guide the conversation and get everyone involved. Next to the panel chair is seated usually a young lawyer. They are trained to listen, take notes and absorb all they observe.

**AZAT:** Is that the recorder?

**RHODES:** Yes. They type in prose a statement that they believe reflects the consensus of the group in response to the question that's being discussed at that time. After, let's say, 30 or 40 minutes of discussion, the recorder will signal the chair that he or she is ready. The recorder will read what he or she has come up with. And the panel then responds to it. They continue the discussion for a while. If they like what it says it might inspire them to go a little bit deeper into the topic. If they disagree then they're going to say so, and where they disagree.

**AZAT:** Some of it sounds intuitive.

**RHODES:** It is. The whole thing is based on body language: nods, "I agree," "I liked this part of it." And that process is repeated until the chair decides we have an answer for that question and they should move onto the next question; then the same process is repeated.

During the sessions, other people are beginning to take all the consensus statements and melding them into a report, which is a consensus of the consensus statements. After an exhausting day of doing that, the recorders meet in the

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evening and go over the draft report of the first day, and then they edit it, discuss it until they all feel comfortable that they've captured the first day. And then you go in the next day and do it again.

One of the things that make us truly unique is the last part, which is on Wednesday morning after two days of discussion, the participants very early in the morning receive a complete report.

**AZAT:** Over the years, how has the product or the process changed?

**JACKSON:** We've refined the product, but the process has really not changed much.

**AZAT:** How about the product?

**RHODES:** The criticism of Town Hall reports used to be that, when you're dealing with consensus and then you have the consensus of the consensus, it got very general. So 10 or more years ago, 15 years ago, several of us started to [look at] how can we get this more specific. It started with the research reports, the questions that are fashioned to be asked; they are much more specific, and they're pushing people.

So, for example, if they say the State should provide better pay for teachers, the next question's going to be, Who's going to pay for that? Where's the money coming from?

And we've trained our panel chairs and everyone to push beyond the general to the specific. As a result, our reports have a lot more specific recommendations in them now, so they're much more useful.

**AZAT:** Does the Town Hall provide outreach after the event is done?

**FALLS:** Yes. My perception when I first got involved was we went through this three-day process, [and then] the report was sent to everybody, and it sat on the shelf for awhile. The Town Hall now goes out to whoever wants to hear from us throughout the State. We present on the topic and the recommendations. So it's much more than just publishing the results in a report.

**JACKSON:** And that outreach has changed significantly over the past five years. Those programs used to be like a standard CLE program, where the participants come and just listen. Now the majority of those programs have a portion at the end specifically designed to get feedback from the community, and the community goes through a mini version of a Town Hall discussion. It's recorded and sent back to those who are interested in seeing what different populations in the state think about this issue.

My favorite part of those programs is when there's a 15-minute discussion with an idea on how to address that issue in their community. I come back six months later and it's been implemented. So we have really taken a much more action-based approach, not

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Gregory Falls, Sherman & Howard

just educating people, but inspiring them to action and taking responsibility for action.

**AZAT:** How does going through the process affect attendees?

**RHODES:** When we said earlier that this process is invigorating to go through, it's true. When the plenary session ends and you see people still hanging around and talking to each other, it's great. They do civics for two and a half days, and they come out having accomplished something. These are people who are used to being civically involved, and they say, Why can't we make our decisions like this, and how are we going to capture this feeling? There's often a recommendation that others should do their job more like Town Hall does.

**GRIER:** Town Hall brings out the best in people; they cooperate, engage and find solutions. It's inspirational.

**AZAT:** How do you ensure you're getting diversity of opinion—in gender, racial, wealth levels?

**JACKSON:** There are 50 board members, and the committee that nominates members looks for diversity.

In the process of selecting participants for a specific Town Hall, there is a great attempt to bring people who are new to the Town Hall in addition to old timers, to bring people who are experts on the topic being discussed, but also people who are not experts.

We also have students attend, and we have students in every single panel so that you have the generational difference.

**AZAT:** And for those who would like to participate but can't afford the three days away from work, I understand there's a new scholarship that's been launched?

**JACKSON:** Yes. One of the biggest challenges has been socioeconomic diversity, because while the cost of attending a Town Hall

is never what it actually costs us to put it on—not even close—it’s still costly. It’s usually around \$1,000 if you’re staying at the hotel, with meals and everything else. So we do our best to try to find ways to get people who have diverse economic representation.

I’m very excited that out of this Town Hall on civic engagement, one recommendation was how do we get more people to have this experience who can’t afford it, and how do we take individual responsibility for doing that? So on the spot, they passed the hat and raised \$2,000 right then and there. And then Blue Cross-Blue Shield was so inspired that they said, We’re going to give you another \$25,000 to start a scholarship fund that will first come into play for this fall Town Hall. It will be designed to help participants have the Town Hall experience who may not otherwise economically have that ability.

**AZAT:** What should a lawyer do if he or she wanted to get involved?

**JACKSON:** Go to the website <http://aztownhall.org/>. There’s a place to fill out if you have an interest to join as a member.

**AZAT:** As soon as we’re done talking, you have a recorder training scheduled. Could you describe why that’s important, especially for lawyers?

**RHODES:** Sure. Attorneys might want to be participants. They have a lot of ways to get involved. They are so important generally and to this process specifically. And law firms traditionally have been financial supporters of Town Hall; they have always recognized the importance of this process to the State, and they’ve nominated clients to be participants. They’ve also helped spread the word about Town Hall messages and made resources available for research and other things.

**AZAT:** And what’s next year’s topic?

**JACKSON:** Next year is going to be all about education. The spring is going to be focusing on higher education, and the fall on pre-K through 12. 