



Arizona Town Hall focuses on economy

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Drastic changes need to take place in Arizona, according to officials from the Arizona Town Hall, who came to Yuma Tuesday to hear ideas from Greater Yuma Economic Development Corp. investors.

Tara Jackson, president of Arizona Town Hall, gave a presentation about findings from the 96th Arizona Town Hall meeting held in April, at GYEDC's quarterly investors luncheon Tuesday. After Jackson's remarks, a facilitated discussion led by Linda Elliot-Nelson, dean of instruction at Arizona Western College, led to the creation of a Yuma statement which will be incorporated into the Town Hall's recommendations from across the state. Once ready, those recommendations will be presented to the governor of Arizona.

The 96th Arizona Town Hall's main points of focus include: education, strategic planning (locally and statewide), changes in government structures and political ideologies, capital formation, reputation management — especially after Arizona's SB 1070, infrastructure — including roads and Internet, broadening the tax base, preserving quality of life, pursuing jobs in the renewable energy industry, job training programs and other economic development actions.

"We need to look at a more stable tax base," said Bruce Dusenberry, chairman of the board at Arizona Town Hall, when trying to discuss how to bring more business to Arizona.

Dusenberry stressed that it is vitally important to attract businesses as well as to develop existing businesses that are already here and the only way we can accomplish this is through fixing the list of recommendations the Town Hall suggested.

The top strengths the Town Hall decided that Arizona had were climate, natural beauty and support for technological innovation, as well as our close proximity to California and Mexico. Key challenges the state faces include the inability to have a statewide focus on economic aspects for all of Arizona in addition to tax structure and certain constitutional and legal restraints.

The state also has a bit of an image problem.

"I thought by now that Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart would have had enough of Arizona but they haven't. The thing is, that is what's out there. Reputation management is about what people think of you, whether it's right or wrong," said Jackson.

Jackson said Arizona has insufficient capital for small businesses. She noted the number one issue that was discussed during the Arizona Town Hall was education and whether or not it is a "perception or a reality" that the K-12 school systems are not where they should be.

"Let's say the type of company that we want to locate to Arizona...their CEOs are looking to move to states where they want to put their children in that education system. And while we have some wonderful teachers and some wonderful schools, the reality is our education system also suffers from some real issues, including our education management," said Jackson.

Julie Engle, president/CEO of GYEDC, said the main things she believes need to be changed are the Arizona constitution, to restructure taxes and build base industries.

“We need to have a sense of Yuma and forget about what Phoenix says about us,” said Yuma County Supervisor Lenore Stuart, as she described how our community has come together.

The statement, which was compiled from comments of the investors at the luncheon, will provide a Yuma perspective to the Town Hall recommendations, which will be presented to the governor (see breakout).

Arizona Town Hall is a nonprofit organization created in 1962 to establish, through research and discussion, a body of Arizona citizens accustomed to the processes of searching analysis and well-informed on the many facets of the state's economic, cultural and social life. Twice each year, the Arizona Town Hall brings together a wide cross-section of approximately 150 prominent Arizona citizens to consider and discuss a topic of major concern to Arizona's future, according to the group's website.

More information can be found at www.aztownhall.org, including the full report of the 96th Arizona Town Hall.

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The statement, compiled from comments of the investors at the luncheon, will be presented to the governor. Here is a portion of that statement:

“In Yuma we have learned to use partnerships and work together to get things done for Yuma. We need to maintain, support and build on these efforts because we cannot rely on Phoenix or the state legislature to look out for our concerns. On a statewide basis, we need to change our tax structure and our constitution to better support attracting the kind of business Arizona wants. Specifically, we need to remove the constitutional restrictions on tax implement financing. We also need a more balanced tax structure — our current structure is overly reliant on business property tax. To attract more business the tax structure should be equalized with other sources of revenue. We are at an opportune moment to take a competitive edge against neighboring states such as California. To do this we need to take additional actions beyond just restructuring our tax base. We need to make sweeping changes in how we educate our children and encourage them to stay here. We need to copy successful economic development strategies and take a proactive approach that includes a rapid response team. Yuma can be proud of what it has accomplished as a community. Yuma can help move Arizona forward by taking action now as individuals, and as a community. As a border community specifically, Yuma has a unique and deep understanding of the immigration issue. The state and the nation could learn much about how to resolve this issue by bringing the discussion to Yuma.”