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INDEPENDENT

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girls soccer rests
up for region; **19**



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GLITTERING UNTIL YEAR'S END

Visitors mill about the Glendale Glitters lights display outside the Glendale Civic Center the night of Dec. 9. These lights will be up through Dec. 31. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

COMING UP

VAI Resort enters new year cautious about opening

Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

If an aspect of the massive VAI Resort opens in 2026, it will be when pumpkin-flavored drinks and food are everywhere — or when “Season’s Greetings” signs pop up

across the Valley.

After years of additions, changes and timelines tossed by the way-side, the resort’s owners are taking a cautious approach to grand opening proclamations.

• See **VAI** on page 11

CITY HALL

New city manager prepares for challenge

Patrick Banger makes
the cross-Valley move
from Gilbert with
downtown a focus

Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Patrick Banger was at a crossroads in his career, and he eventually chose the chance to go big over the comfort of continuing down his current path.

The large-scale entertainment and

municipal projects underway and in the plans in Glendale, more than any other reason, led him to leave Gilbert after 14 years as its city manager.

Banger will begin as Glendale city manager on Jan. 12. Current city manager Kevin Phelps announced his intent to step down in February.

“Professionally, it was those opportunities — one last great opportunity before I retire. I’m 56. Ten years from now I’ll be 66 and if we still have great things ahead of us and there’s

• See **Banger** on page 14



Patrick Banger, who will begin work as Glendale’s city manager on Jan. 12, poses for a photo Dec. 5 in the courtyard outside Glendale Civic Center. (Courtesy city of Glendale)



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City, VAI Resort plan for driveway easement near Black Lot

VAI Resort and the city of Glendale are considering shared access driveway easement and maintenance agreement on a road that functions as a driveway. It is on the parcel just east of the Black Lot of State Farm Stadium.

Originally, Glendale was going to sell this land to VAI. The city owns 14 acres marked for future development east of the driveway.

Read online:

<https://tinyurl.com/67bx7zhc>

Council tables art wall proposal for new City Hall

Nothing is certain regarding artwork outside of Glendale's new City Hall.

However, following the Nov. 25 City Council workshop, the art wall planned for the building's southern side is highly unlikely to be the design recommended by the Glendale Arts Commission.

Four of five council members said they did not like the chosen art by Cliff Garten Studio from Venice, Calif., or did not like its price tag.

<https://tinyurl.com/muf34j6e>

Glendale newborn the latest to use digital foot printing

The birth of Daniella Luna on Nov. 16, at Abrazo Arrowhead Campus in Glendale, was a personal celebration for her parents.

Abby Luna, a 34-year-old registered nurse who has worked at Abrazo Arrowhead for years, chose the hospital's CertiScan Technologies digital foot printing system for her baby.

<https://tinyurl.com/3pfkmc96>

Council member Turner decides not to seek reelection in 2026

Richard Smith

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Bart Turner will finish his 12th year as a Glendale City Council member in 2026 and has decided not to seek reelection that summer.

Turner announced his decision not to run Nov. 17 on his Facebook and LinkedIn pages. He had neck and back surgeries earlier this year.

"As you might imagine, I've had plenty of time over the last year and a half or so for contemplation and introspection. My life so far has been unbelievably bountiful. I hope I have given back to this world a portion large enough to earn the space and time I have thus far consumed. I find as the years begin to race by, my remaining dreams and goals are becoming stacked so impossibly high I fear I will not be able to get to them all. Or even most of them. What I am trying to say is that it is time in my life for a change. My current term of office on the Glendale City Council ends on December 8, 2026. Just over 12 months from now. I have decided I will not be running for re-election," Turner wrote.

He is the council member for the Barrel District, which runs from 51st Avenue to Glendale's western boundary between Northern Avenue and Peoria Avenue, and from 55th Avenue to the western boundary between Peoria Avenue and Cactus Road.

South of Northern Avenue and down to Orangewood Avenue, the Barrel District's western boundary is Grand Avenue and its eastern boundary 55th Avenue.

On Oct. 10, Michael Calles announced his intent to run for the Barrel District seat in 2026. Calles



Glendale City Council member Bart Turner speaks during a session of Off the Cuff in September 2018 at Cuff in downtown Glendale. In november, Turner announced that he will not run for re-election in 2026. (Glendale Chamber of Commerce on Facebook)

is a veteran of two branches of the armed forces, retired Phoenix Police officer, and longtime community leader.

"Glendale residents deserve safe neighborhoods, fiscal responsibility, and a city council that works for them, not one that wastes taxpayer dollars. I'm running to restore trust, strengthen public safety, and deliver real results for families in the Barrel District," Calles stated in a press release.

While Turner is not running, his announcement also made clear his preference for his successor. And he invited the public to join him in celebrating the launch of Lisa Baker's campaign for Glendale City Council on the night of Dec. 16.

Baker has served on Glendale's Community Development Advisory Commission, the city's last three bond committees, and the Glendale Chamber of Commerce Board of

Directors — all while being a wife, mom, and Realtor.

Turner co-authored Arizona's successful independent redistricting initiative, which moved Arizona's redistricting authority away from the Legislature and over to an independent, politically balanced redistricting commission.

He is the recipient of Glendale Community Council's Volene Stockham Humanitarian Award recognizing a lifetime of community service and the Glendale Commission on Neighborhoods Spark Award recognizing leadership in neighborhood revitalization in the Catlin Court neighborhood.

Prior to being elected, Turner served as president of the Glendale Historical Society, on the Glendale Arts Council, and the West Valley Child Crisis Center and as chairman of the Glendale Parks and Recreation Commission.

Gagandeep “Gaugs” Singh, M.D.

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HEALTH

DVUSD high school hoops team adds off-court treatments

O'Connor Eagles
visit wellness center
in Glendale

By Steve Stockmar
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

When the Sandra Day O'Connor High School boys basketball team is on the floor at maximum speed during a game, their coaches' eyes are watching. Not just for shots, or for correct rotations on set plays.

The Eagles, who were 6A state runners-up in 2024 and are off to a 6-4 start this winter, are under the watchful eye of head coach Josh Cole and his staff when it comes to the players' conditioning. Basketball is a long season, and some players might report to camp in November in less than ideal shape, or



Members of the O'Connor boys basketball team take in some green light therapy on Nov. 21 at Yoga Cold Bath in Glendale. "What green light therapy does is it simulates you being out in nature, so your brain picks this up as being out in nature, and the light comes through the 'leaves of the tree' creating green light that helps with anxiety, depression, headaches, migraines," co-owner Sarah Touchstone explained. (Independent Newsmedia/Steve Stockmar)

by the time the February playoff grind rolls around, their bodies and minds might be gassed.

"We chart little things like when

the shot goes up are they crashing (the boards) or are they going to block out? Or when it's transition, are they sprinting the floor?" Cole said. "We've got

IF YOU GO

What: Yoga Cold Bath

Where: 3820 W. Happy Valley Road, Suite C-143, Glendale

Hours: 7 a.m.-4 p.m. seven days a week

More Information: yogacoldbath.com

enough coaches that are looking for — are they trying to cut corners to catch their breath?"

Much of those healthy habits — for both mind and body — go beyond practices inside their north Phoenix gym.

Eagles players have been spending

• See **Wellness** on page 8



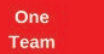
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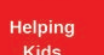
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BUSINESS MOVES



HTEAO AND BLACK ROCK

Cactus Road. Its hours are Wednesdays-Saturdays 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays.

3 Ezbaichi, a new teppanyaki grill serving Japanese-inspired dishes at 5110 W. Northern Ave., is now open seven days a week during construction until the drive thru is open.

Richard Smith/Independent Newsmedia

4 HTeaO, a leading national iced tea franchise, opened its second Glendale store this year at 5254 W. Bell Road. The first location opened in July near Westgate. Each HTeaO offers more than 20 crafted flavors of sweetened and unsweetened tea, all made using a proprietary water filtration system and all natural ingredients.

5 Next door, in the former location of Gravity Coffee, at 5250 W. Bell Road, a new **Black Rock Coffee Bar** has moved in.

REMODELING

6 The **Glendale Walmart Supercenter** at 5010 N. 95th Ave., celebrated the store's grand re-opening Dec. 12 following a \$15-million remodel. It features a newly painted building, new landscaping, additional grocery aisles, a new pickup and delivery offerings, fully remodeled bathrooms, and the addition of a new mother's room, new flooring and a new pharmacy layout. That day, the store donated \$1,000 to Team 24 and \$5,000 to Copper Canyon High School.

ADDITION

7 The **Best Bar** is now available at all 11 **AJ's Fine Foods** locations in Arizona, including the Glendale store at 20050 N. 67th Ave. This Phoenix-based small-batch nut and seed bar company has made its first entry into retail, offering four flavors: Original, Cinnamon, Chocolate Chip and Seeds.

NOW OPEN

1 Pizzicata opened its new location at Glendale's Citadelle in December, introducing an Italian dining experience shaped by the journey of spouses Federico Venturini and Viola Tagliaferri. The restaurant, at 19420 N. 59th Ave., features signature Roman pinsa, Neapolitan pizza, fresh-made pasta and daily house-crafted sauces, a cocktail and wine program, the private kitchen bistro and private chef experience, as well as the seven fishes Christmas dinner. It is the couple's fourth Valley location.

2 The new home of **2nd Chance Indoor Flea Market** at 6660 W.

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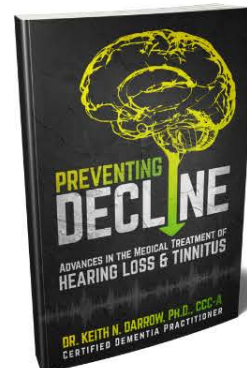
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Wellness

• From page 4

some of that time off campus at Yoga Cold Bath, a wellness and sports recovery center that just opened this past September in nearby north Glendale. The space offers treatment strategies known as “contrast therapy,” which use cold bath plunge, hot mineral bath, sauna, yoga and green- and red-light therapy to accelerate healing and recovery.

While the center gives wellness tips to the players, the business has also given back to Deer Valley Unified School District.

The boys basketball team raised \$10,000 for their program, which Yoga Cold Bath doubled and donated another \$20,000 toward the program. And through O’Connor High School, its athletic department including JROTC, and the Stetson Hills Elementary PTSA, Yoga Cold Bath generated “the largest school donations in both Stetson



Yoga Cold Bath co-owners Sarah Touchstone and Brooks Maschmeier welcome another kind of client into the studio on Nov. 21 in Glendale. There are some health and wellness services on site for dogs as well. (Independent Newsmedia/Steve Stockmar)

and O’Connor history,” according to the school district, to the tune of nearly \$100,000 raised and donated directly

to O’Connor sports teams and clubs as well as a donation to Stetson Hills.

In another donation, Yoga Cold

Bath paid off school lunch meal debts amounting to \$10,000 to support lower income and free/reduced meal eligible students and families at Stetson Hills, O’Connor, and Mountain Ridge High School.

Some of those students impacted by the donations may even be the ones coming in for those mind and body renewal practices at the wellness studio just a couple miles down the road from the school.

“A lot of times you give donations and you give them anonymously or to a larger organization but you don’t see the people, necessarily, the individuals that are impacted. But there’s a big impact overall here,” said Sarah Touchstone, who opened Yoga Cold Bath with her partner Brooks Maschmeier. “It’s really neat because we do get to see the actual faces.”

Cole welcomes the health and wellness practices some student-athletes may not be exposed to outside of the weight room.

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EDUCATION



Wesley Dewitt attended a Deer Valley Unified school in New River in kindergarten, graduated from Boulder Creek High School in 2009, and has been a bus driver with the district for almost 10 years. (Independent Newsmedia/Steve Stockmar)

2025 was a good year for DVUSD bus drivers

Wesley Dewitt won statewide top honors as driver, has been with Deer Valley district since Kindergarten

By Steve Stockmar
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Fighting traffic, or weather, or keeping a schedule, all from behind the wheel while driving is one thing. It happens daily and all at once for most Valley drivers.

Focusing on all that *with* a bus load of anywhere from 50 to 80 kids sitting behind you? That's something else, and there's a catch — try doing it twice a day.

Wesley Dewitt — who's one of the top school bus drivers in Arizona, literally — has been behind the wheel of a Deer Valley Unified School District bus since 2016. Multitasking is an understatement on his daily routes.

"My mind's weird," Dewitt said. "I would say I have 35 'tabs' open."

Last year Deer Valley Unified saw its drivers take 174 buses on 108 routes for almost 12,000 students

over a collective 2 million miles. The numbers may be eye-popping, but drivers like Dewitt have kids of their own so, on a personal level, things aren't *that* different.

"For me it's easier because I have kids so I just listen for the screaming and the 'ow!' and the 'don't do that,'" he laughed. "They're kids. They're gonna be loud and do things. My biggest thing is as long as they're sitting down."

It was a good 2025 for district bus drivers.

While the Deer Valley Unified governing board in April made the tough budgetary choice to not give staff salary raises across the board, board members did reconsider bus drivers specifically. To keep up with other bus driver salary structures around the Valley, the board voted unanimously to approve a \$2.03 per hour salary bump "for all existing employees that drive a bus with students." The \$400,000 expense is funded by Medicaid in Public Schools.

• See **Drivers** on page 10



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Drivers

• From page 9

In an added show of support that month, while some Arizona lawmakers were looking to get rid of the School Bus Advisory Council, the Arizona House with bipartisan support voted against dissolving the agency.

Although established to assist the Arizona Department of Public Safety in developing the state's school bus regulations, among other priorities including bus driver safety, the Council was one of many state boards, councils, commissions, and committees deemed "functionally unnecessary" by bill sponsor Rep. Alexander Koldin, R-Scottsdale.

Also, while seemingly facing perpetual bus driver shortages, districts hoped to get support at the federal level through the bipartisan Driving Forward Act, with Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly among the sponsors, to exempt new school bus drivers from the "Under-the-Hood" Commercial Driver's License testing requirement to help alleviate the nationwide shortage of drivers. The bill has been introduced in both Congressional chambers but has not yet been signed into law.

While government bureaucracy does what it does, drivers like Dewitt keep getting their students to and from school safely each day.

Speaking of safety, Dewitt in 2023 earned first place in the Arizona Association for Pupil Transportation School Bus Safety Road-ee, an annual skills challenge for statewide bus drivers that takes place in the parking lot at the state fairgrounds. Competing against 75 other drivers representing Arizona school districts, Dewitt came out on top through all kids of driving tests, including parallel parking a school bus.

"It's a lot easier than you think," said Dewitt, who hasn't competed

2024-25 DVUSD SCHOOL YEAR

Buses: 174

Bus Miles Driven Annually: 2 million

Routes driven: 108

Number of students transported to and from school: 11,684

SOURCE: Deer Valley Unified School District

since and jokingly talks about retiring as a champion, with a big trophy in his office to boot.

And those skills come in handy out there in the field. Navigating through traffic is one thing, but what is truly inexcusable is how often he sees motorists blow right past his bus's extended stop sign to let students off.

"All the time. Daily," Dewitt said. "It's a daily occurrence."

Motorists who are issued citations by law enforcement officers for passing a school bus when a stop arm is extended could face a civil penalty and possibly a suspended driver license under state law.

Dewitt has literally been with Deer Valley Unified his whole life. He went to kindergarten in New River and is a 2009 graduate of Boulder Creek High School.

Once a passenger himself on those district buses, he now finds himself taking kids to and from school. And while at times in addition to driving he can be a counselor and a teacher to de-escalate situations through special training drivers receive for managing behavioral as well as physical disabilities, Dewitt highly recommends those looking for work and looking to make a difference to apply to be a school bus driver.

"It's worth it, as long as you care about kids," he said. "When the kids are on my bus, they're my kids."

FROM THE COVER

VAI

• From page 1

"We are not ready to provide a specific opening date this far in advance. When we open will be a function of how much of the resort will be operational while still delivering a guest experience worthy of both the VAI and Mattel brands," Rian Kirkman, VAI's SVP of marketing, stated in an email. "We anticipate making a specific date announcement approximately 9-12 months in advance of opening, with adventure park tickets, concert tickets and/or hotel rooms on sale a few months prior to opening."

Glendale originally approved a development agreement for the \$1.2 billion resort — then called Crystal Lagoons — in September 2020. Its original targeted opening was December 2022, two months before Super Bowl LVII at nearby State Farm



Construction crews work on the VAI Resort south of State Farm Stadium in Glendale this past November. Both the resort and the Mattel Adventure Park included in it have been delayed to a 2026 opening date after plans to open in 2024 and 2025. (Courtesy VAI Resort)

Stadium.

The name changed. The construction company changed. Plans for the resort doubled in size.

Projected openings in 2023, 2024 and 2025 came and went. Three election items, one aimed in part at VAI and two calling for voters direct-

ly to reverse Glendale City Council-approved land deals related to VAI, went to the ballot box.

Though it all, Glendale City Manager Kevin Phelps remained sanguine about the resort, saying it was the only case he could think of where a developer delayed a project multiple times to add more attractions to it.

His successor, Patrick Banger, who takes over as city manager Jan. 12, said he believes the same about VAI's potential.

"I know it's dragged on and everybody is anxious to get it open," Banger said. "I completely agree with Kevin — \$1.3 billion and climbing. The magnitude of what's being developed is singularly unique on a national scale."

Led by CEO and President Grant Fisher, the resort's plans now include Mattel Adventure Park; a beach-

• See **Resort** on page 13

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of interest for Rep. Abe Hamadeh.

Mr. Peak is concerned because Rep. Hamadeh inserted language into the National Defense Authorization Act tasking TYR Tactical with producing a research report on next-generation body armor. The owner of TYR tactical, Jason Beck, is mayor of Peoria and had recently visited Rep. Hamadeh.



Laura Accordini

I spent more than 30 years in the defense industry and can assure Mr. Peak that this is a standard federal government practice.

Research papers provided by industry subject matter experts help the federal government understand the state of the art in a given technology, as well as the possible advances that can be made. Very few submitted research papers result in a formal Request for Proposals to develop the technology (in this example tactical body armor).

If an RFP is issued, responses are open to all viable vendors/companies, and the contract award would be subject to Defense Federal Acquisition Regulations. DFARS requires that an independent source selection committee evaluate all submitted proposals for a formal selection.

Selection is a transparent process with defined criteria (cost, schedule, technical requirements, etc.) that must be addressed in the company proposals. On the rare occasion that a sole source contract is awarded, it must be proven that the awardee is

the only company with the needed technology.

Rep Hamadeh doesn't have a conflict of interest; nor does Mr. Beck.

Laura Accordini
GLENDALE

Editor's note: Laura Accordini is a retired program director.

Transportation investment will continue under Prop 479

Dec. 31, 2025, marks the end of half-cent sales tax collections authorized under Proposition 400 that helped build transportation infrastructure throughout Maricopa County.

Looking back at the last 20 years, Prop 400 funded construction of Loop 202 (South Mountain Freeway), Loop 303 in the West Valley and the interim State Route 24 (Gateway Freeway) in the Southeast Valley.

To date, the Proposition 400 tax revenue has helped fund more than 440 corridor miles of freeway and highway projects in the region, 315 corridor miles of street improvements, as well as the extension of the light rail and increased bus service throughout the region.

In November 2024, Maricopa County voters passed Proposition 479, ensuring 20 more years of transportation investment, with collections beginning on Jan. 1, 2026.

To learn more about how Prop 479 will continue to strengthen the region's infrastructure and what projects are planned Valleywide, visit azmag.gov/Prop479.

Maricopa Association of Governments

Council member Guzman endorses Calles in Barrel District

I am proud to endorse Michael Calles for Glendale City Council in the Barrel District.

As a dedicated public servant with a distinguished career as a Phoenix Police officer, Michael's unwavering commitment to protecting our communities shines through in every action he takes. His selfless dedication to our country, forged through nine years of honorable service in the U.S. Army and



Dianna Guzman

Air Force have instilled in him the leadership and integrity we desperately need at City Hall.

Michael Calles is exactly the kind of leader Glendale needs someone who understands the meaning of selflessness and service.

His commitment to Public Safety, Economic Development, Better Neighborhoods, and Investments in our youth; coupled with his experience, discipline, and heart for public service will bring a steady, principled voice to the Barrel District and the entire city.

Dianna Guzman
GLENDALE

Editor's note: Dianna Guzman is the Glendale City Council Member in the Yucca District.

Beck research report not a conflict of interest

Brett Peak, co-chair of Northwest Valley Indivisible, a progressive grassroots group, recently expressed his concerns regarding a potential conflict

Take the Civility Pledge

Yes, I will do my part to help my community become a safe place for people to engage in civil discourse about public issues. Visit iniusa.org/civility-pledge/ to take the pledge.

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Corrections

We will promptly correct all factual errors. We offer a "right of reply" to the people about whom we write.

Readers who disagree with a news story are welcome to respond with a letter.

Resort

• From page 11

themed Konos Island; VAI Amphitheater — an 11,000 seat concert venue announced in 2025; and a shopping plaza.

“Not only am I not concerned about it. I think we’re going to be blessed to have someone that is actually taking the time to make it a premier property. It’s worth the wait,” Banger said.

Worker Power, an Arizona-based political action committee tied to Unite Here Local 11, led the three measures connected to VAI to ballot.

Proposition 499 made the Nov. 5, 2024, ballot by gaining more than the 8,000 signatures from Glendale residents.

It would have required new record-keeping requirements from a new city department and a mandated minimum wage of \$20 per hour for hotel and event center workers.

Nearly 57% of voters opposed that proposition.

On Dec. 20, 2024, Worker Power PAC filed two referendum petitions to refer the adoption of Resolution No. R24-131 and Ordinance No. O24-46 to Glendale voters.

That led to the May 20 election with both of those Glendale council votes on the ballot, as Proposition 401 and 402, respectively. Voter support would uphold the council’s actions.

If passed, Proposition 401 would have changed the city’s general plan

to rezone a 10-acre parcel for VAI Resort’s corporate offices and parking. Glendale voters denied this with a 51% no vote.

“Glendale residents made it clear that they didn’t like the idea of changing the land’s zoning from parks and open space to zoning that would allow an office building and parking lot,” Brendan Walsh, Worker Power executive director, stated in a May 22 press release.

“A recent study ranked Glendale as the least sustainable of the 100 most populated cities in the United States. Tuesday’s results are a step in the right direction for Glendale’s future.”

Voters backed Proposition 402, which amended the VAI Resort Centerpoint planned area development to rezone 66.31 acres at the southeast corner of Cardinals Way and Loop 101.

Banger said the ability to guide major development projects was a major factor in his decision to leave his job of 14 years as Gilbert city manager to the other side of the Valley in Glendale. VAI qualifies as a big part of the draw.

“Outside of the properties in Las Vegas or the Disney properties, I’ve never seen anything like VAI,” Banger said. “That can become an international draw. And you’ve got State Farm Stadium a stone’s throw away, and Westgate and Camelback Ranch. You have some major destination entertainment- and sports-related draws that you can leverage into putting in more.”

A LONG TIME COMING

A timeline for the VAI Resort, which has grown and changed — and stretched several extra years.

Sept. 8, 2020

Glendale City Council votes to approve a development agreement to bring a Crystal Lagoons Island Resort to the city’s Sports and Entertainment District, near Westgate, State Farm Stadium and Gila River Arena.

June 10, 2021

City officially breaks ground on the Crystal Lagoons Island Resort project with a target date of completion set for December 2022, which would put the resort in prime placement for when Glendale hosts the Super Bowl in February 2023 across the parking lot at State Farm Stadium.

Jan. 28, 2022

Hunt Construction Group Inc., the resort’s construction manager, pulls out of the project. “Just a business decision for all involved when we go in one direction as opposed to the original,” Hunt Construction CMO John Keenan said.

April 26, 2022

What once went by the name Crystal Lagoon Island Resort, plans for the newly rechristened VAI Resort almost double in size and is projected to become the largest hotel in Arizona, with an announced likely opening in late spring 2023.

May 18, 2023

The new \$1 billion destination resort announced the latest addition to the 60-acre complex — a \$40 million concert stage, with the resort tentatively scheduled to open in 2024.

July 24, 2023

Worker Power, a community group that advocated against the proposed Arizona Coyotes arena and entertainment district in Tempe, gathers signatures to block the upcoming VAI Resort in Glendale.

June 26, 2024

VAI Resort announced Pennsylvania-based TAIT as its production partner. TAIT will partner with artists and rights holders to bring concerts to VAI’s amphitheater, which features moving LED screens on the rotunda stage.

Dec. 12, 2024

On Dec. 10, Mayor Jerry Weiers and Councilmembers Leandro Baldenegro, Joyce Clark, Ian Hugh and Ray Malnar approved a parking garage space use agreement with the VAI Resort to essentially buy 800 spaces on the ground floor of the resort’s garage for just under \$1788 million total. Councilmembers Lauren Tolmachoff and Bart Turner voted against the proposal.



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FROM THE COVER

Banger

• From page 1

great staff and great elected officials, I could work longer. That’s kind of the horizon I’ve been looking at. I feel very lucky to have this opportunity of one last great opportunity before I retire,” Banger said.

He said he did not truly look into the possibility until August.

John Cross, the recruiter, is the retired city manager of Queen Creek. Banger knows Cross and Phelps quite well.

Banger said he knew about State Farm Stadium, Westgate, and Luke Air Force Base.

At first he told Cross if he can think of anyone he’d get back to him. Cross called Banger back and spoke a little bit more about the things that were going on out here, like specifics about what is being

built at VAI Resort, as well as the rest of the entertainment district.

“For me, professionally, I really enjoy the large projects — working with developers, working with corporations on relocations or expansions and leveraging those to the benefit of communities. The more I got to know that, the more I became intrigued,” Banger said.

Before Gilbert hired him in June 2011, Banger was city administrator at O’Fallon, Missouri, near St. Louis.

At that time Gilbert was recognized as a nice residential community, Banger said. With the plans the city had for the downtown and commercial areas, he said he saw great opportunity.

“In the Heritage District we had a handful of restaurants. We had a beautiful, small theater that is flourishing and is a wonderful asset. There wasn’t much there. Even in

terms of restaurants, most people left Gilbert to go out to eat. Now people are coming in to eat and the downtown has been a huge success story. There’s a large \$400 million project that is underway right now. It’s going to bring in a hotel, a 100,000-square-foot Class A office building, about 25,000 square feet of retail and restaurants.”

Rivulon, a 250-acre development that blends high end office space, retail and restaurants opened in late 2015 near the south Loop 202 in Gilbert. Isagenix International’s world headquarters opened there in 2016, while Deloitte, TD SYNEX, Morgan Stanley and Merrill Lynch opened offices in Rivulon.

Gilbert Regional Park and Desert Sky Park, and revitalizing the Heritage District were among the noteworthy achievements during Banger’s tenure.

Plans for Gilbert were flexible,

Banger said, and the city should build out in the next five years or so.

“When it comes to the people ... that was one of the hardest aspects of it. We have a great team of people that work very, very hard serving that community,” Banger said. “They’re not co-workers and colleagues. I think of them like family.”

That made leaving Gilbert a difficult decision.

He’ll also leave his family home in Gilbert and move with his wife, Belinda, to Glendale. The couple has three grown daughters.

Former Gilbert Mayor Jenn Daniels said his influence reached far beyond the projects he helped shepherd.

“The way that he built people,” Daniels said. “That would probably be the first thing.”

He got to know the entire Gilbert

• See **Manager** on page 16

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Manager

• From page 14

business and community ecosystem.

There is still work to be done in that Southeast Valley city, but most of it is finishing touches, Banger said.

“This profession of city management is a unique one. We have to live in the community we manage. If you’re taking a new job, you’re also taking a new house and all the things that come with that,” he said. “I’ll say some of my peers and friends in the profession asked, ‘Are you crazy?’ I’d had a tremendous amount of success in Gilbert. Many people would just ride that into retirement. That’s just not how I’m wired. Professionally, I like to be challenged.”

He was hired Oct. 14, a bit after a two-day interview process in Glendale.

In November and December,

Banger got to know the staff at his new city and met more with the council.

“I’ve met with Patrick Banger a couple of times, and I’m very impressed with how well he understands how cities work and how easily he identifies problems and offers solutions,” Glendale Mayor Jerry Weiers stated. “He’s energetic and truly focused on what’s best for our residents. We will do whatever it takes to continue making Glendale a better place to live.”

Now, listening to stakeholders and staff is the key, Banger said.

He got to know Phelps well, and is impressed by the job he and his team have done in recent years.

The other major construction project in Glendale will finish this spring when a \$94 million renovation of City Hall ends with the building reopening downtown.

A lot of people will stop by City Hall and it can reestablish the down-

town as a destination.

“That’s foot traffic coming to City Hall to transact whatever business they have with the city. That’s foot traffic coming into our downtown,” Banger said.

After his work in the rise of the Gilbert Heritage District, Banger will be charged with getting visitors back to Historic Downtown Glendale.

He said downtown Glendale has a lot more to work with now than the Gilbert Heritage District had when he arrived in 2011.

“Downtown Glendale was a place that was hopping and people used to come to. That’s very natural for communities and for things to ebb and flow,” Banger said. “The downtown itself, the structures that are here and Catlin Court and those historic homes, there’s an incredible opportunity to return that vibrancy to the downtown and build on what’s already there.”

Foot traffic is the key.

At first in Gilbert, the city brought in a farmer’s market, food trucks and art festivals to downtown. Festivals, art shows and theater are proven draws, Banger said.

“The challenges may differ between the town of Gilbert and the city of Glendale, but understanding his thought process — how he takes problems and applies common-sense solutions — gives us complete confidence in his ability,” Weiers said.

Downtown needs to have unique draws from Westgate and the Arrowhead area, Banger said, adding that city-owned parcels can fill the gaps.

“What’s missing in our downtown that we could or should bring in? I’ve always viewed downtowns are like the living room for their cities. They also are a point of pride for their cities,” Banger said. “The theater in Gilbert’s downtown has been a huge draw.”



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TRADITION



The festively dressed Apollo High School flag line twirls its flags during the Hometown Christmas Parade Dec. 13 in downtown Glendale. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

Christmas parade brings generations, groups together

Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Glendale's kids are growing up with the Hometown Christmas Parade as a downtown tradition.

The 12th edition of the parade along Glendale Avenue from 52nd Avenue to 58th Avenue Dec. 13 featured a whopping 126 entries — many of them focused on or including the youth of the community or near-by Peoria or Phoenix.

Apollo High School seniors Lydia Smith and Whitney Christman led the school's marching band near the front of the parade. Both have marched in the parade in all four years of high school.

"I feel like it's gotten more fun every year," Christman said.

It has been a banner year for the band, which won several festivals in the fall in Division II of the state.

On Nov. 15 the Hawks marching band competed in the Arizona Band and Orchestra Directors Association

state finals for the first time in years, placing sixth in Division II.

"Something that made this parade special was it was our last one. Second, I think our band has improved over the years we've been here. We made it to state this year," Smith said.

Gabe Lugo is in his 19th year as Apollo's band director and his 24th year in the Glendale Union High School District.

Apollo marched in the parade for its fourth straight year.

"It's a big parade and we want to represent," Lugo said. "It's all about community relationships and building that community."

After her final Christmas parade, Smith said it was inspiring to see everybody's improvement and how much effort they put in.

The Hometown Christmas Parade celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ.

It is presented by a volunteer committee made up of nonprofits, faith-

• See **Parade** on page 18

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Parade

• From page 17

based organizations, businesses, and residents. The city of Glendale does not run the parade, but all seven council members took part.

Mayor Jerry Weiers walked with the entry in front of Apollo's marching band, flag line and ROTC. He was one of about 40 people carrying a large American flag banner.

"I love this parade, what it does and what it represents for our city, the fact that people get to come out and celebrate the very reason for the season. Even more so, people come to downtown Glendale and get to experience some of their home town and things that they remember," Weiers said.

It was Karim's third time marching in the parade with the Swift Kids Branch of the Boys and Girls Club, which is just west of down-

town at 6420 W. Maryland Ave.

He has gone to this boys and girls club branch for about three years.

"I like how in this one we were able to be dressed up as Toy Story characters," Karim said.

The parade also serves as a collection of food and money for Glendale's Hope for Hunger Food Bank.

Mel Martin, owner and founder of the Martin Auto Museum near the border of Phoenix and Glendale, will serve as grand marshal. His auto museum provided many of the cars used in the parade. A large crowd from all locales and walks of life lined Glendale Avenue.

"There's a gentleman – I do not know what his name is – that for the last seven or eight years in a row, he comes up to me and brings his family up and says, 'Mayor, would you take a picture,'" Weiers said. "They said today this has become a tradition for them."

THINGS TO DO

DEC. 27

Live Music

Jerome and the boys are back at Westside and fan at the Glendale night club are ready. The 911: Dangerous Band is a tribute band that aims to capture the essence of Kool & The Gang. Their mission is to provide explosive and spiritual musical performances that emotionally connect with audiences, and boy do they deliver. Reservations only held until the start of the music. Premium seating includes couches and bucket seats. General admission is restricted to high-top tables and bar seating. Specific seating is first come first served. Guests are encouraged to arrive early. Sorry, no refunds. There is a two drink minimum (alcohol or non-alcohol) per guest.

Westside Blues, Jazz & More
17045 N. 59th Ave.

8:30 p.m.-Midnight. Doors open at 7

JAN. 10-FEB. 1

Fine Art Show

One of the longest running statewide art shows in Arizona returns to a historic Glendale site. The 63rd annual Glendale Arts Council Juried Fine Arts Show will take place at Historic Sahuaro Ranch Park in the Fruit Packing House. All entries are exhibited and for sale from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 10 and Sunday, Jan. 11. The displays will be closed on Jan. 12 for judging. The juried show and sale begins Jan. 13 and is open daily through Feb. 1. The Glendale Art Council's exhibit shows off original sculptures, oils, water colors, and much more from artists across Arizona. A portion of all art sales provides grants and scholarships that promote fine art in our community.

Sahuaro Ranch Park (Fruit Packing Shed)
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SPORTS

Mountain Ridge girls soccer rests up for region

Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Mountain Ridge girls soccer is not exactly sure where it will end up this season, whether it's deep in the 6A playoffs again or in the final eight of the Open Division.

Wherever they land, the Mountain Lions will be ready thanks to the unrelenting Desert Valley Region.

"I'm looking forward to our region games. The school rivalries ... they always get chippy and they get aggressive. That passion makes it fun," senior Jenna Dudley said.

Region rivals Liberty and O'Connor reached the quarterfinal round of 6A. Pinnacle lost to Desert Vista in the 6A title game, after the Thunder got past the Mountain Lions.

Boulder Creek went 2-2 in the region, yet made it all the way to the Open Division semifinals

"It's a battle royale. A lot of times, the teams are going to the play-in, playoff or now the Open. It's a tough region," Coach Ryne Jakubos said.

Last season, the Mountain Lions lost as many games in region play (two) as they did in the non-region play and playoffs combined. Mountain Ridge and O'Connor also tied 3-3 to end the regular season.

Scottsdale Desert Mountain blitzed the Mountain Lions 5-1 in Glendale during the first round of the Open Division, dropping Mountain Ridge back into 6A.

"If we can get into the Open, we want to be competing in the Open.

If we make it to 6A, we want to compete in that," junior forward Marlowe Dockter said. "Whatever opportunity we're given, we want to seize that and take it as far as we can."

Mountain Ridge pushed the eventual 6A champion Desert Vista before falling 2-1 in the semifinal at Ahwatukee.

Getting to the semifinals for the first time in a long time holds the 2025-26 team to a higher standard, junior Ava Thornton said.

"The culture is way better on the team. You can just tell we're a lot more connected, even though we might not be as talented as we were last year. We play a lot better together," Thornton said.

Players from all three levels of the program last season are con-

tributing to the varsity this year, Jakubos said.

The coach agreed with his captains' assessment of this team's unity.

"The connection they have as a team, every year, is different. This year they seem pretty tight and it's great," Jakubos said.

"Every practice I ask them after how they rate it. They're pretty honest with themselves. I honestly think they, as a group, are holding each other accountable, which is fantastic."

How that translated against the top of 6A will not come into focus until Jan. 14, when the Mountain Lions travel to Liberty to start Desert Valley play.

Unlike most of their rivals,

• See **Ridge** on page 20

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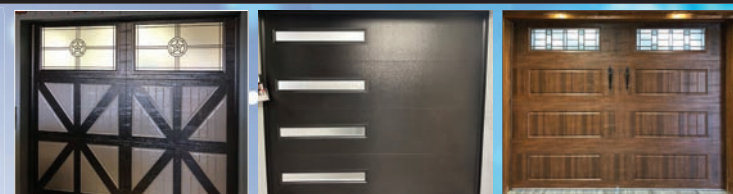
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Peoria • March 26, 2026 • Westbrook Village

SunCity West • April 22, 2026 • SCW Foundation

Sun City • May 4, 2026 • Sundial Rec Center

Surprise • August 18, 2026 • The Colonnade

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Mountain Ridge girls soccer captains, from left, junior Kate Edrington, junior Ava Thornton, senior Jenna Dudley and junior Marlowe Dockter smile for a photo in front of the stands Dec. 16. The team had a gift exchange after practice that day. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

Ridge

• From page 19

Mountain Ridge does not play in a tournament during winter break.

"I usually avoid it. I like to keep bodies fresh," Jakubos said.

The varsity roster is still young, with five seniors, compared to six last year.

Three of the four captains are juniors. Dudley is a captain for the third straight year.

"We see who is kind of a natural leader, who brings it every day, who is positive and who knows the direction we want to go. Those four all have an impact," Jakubos said.

Several first-year varsity players are starters.

Jakubos said sophomore Ramsey Grasky has been impressive, while freshman goalkeeper Izzy Brniovich is pushing three-year starter Kaylee McInerney.

Sophomore Taryn McGee impressed junior captain Kate Edrington.

"I think Marlowe has really

stepped up. She's taken on that role of the 9. She's doing incredible up there all year," Dudley said.

Even though they were not part of the semifinal team last year, the new varsity players joined the squad with the same goals in mind, Dockter said.

While Boulder Creek, Liberty and Pinnacle are major rivals in their own right, the biggest game comes at the end of the season.

Mountain Ridge plays host to O'Connor Feb. 6.

"We've been feeling like we were not up to our standards in the Liberty matchup in recent years," Edrington said. "Definitely, O'Connor will be the main rivalry. Every sport is always O'Connor."

This program talks about setting a new standard every year.

In 2025-26 the Mountain Lions want to do something they have never done — and it's not winning state.

"That's our biggest goal. We've never won region before and we want that," Thornton said.

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Announcement

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