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From festivals to theaters, West Valley cities grow entertainment footprint

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

From art-lined park pathways in Litchfield Park to live music echoing across Goodyear's Estrella Lakeside Amphitheater, West Valley cities are heading into spring with a packed calendar of free, family-centered events designed to do more than entertain.

City leaders say the festivals, concerts and movie nights are intentional investments aimed at strengthening civic pride, supporting small businesses and building connections in rapidly growing communities.

On Saturday, March 21, Goodyear will host a music and arts festival at Estrella Lakeside Amphitheater from 4 to 10 p.m., featuring five live bands, including pop-rock headliner Plain White T's. The event includes artisan vendors, food trucks, giant lawn games and a beer

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West Valley coach builds water polo community from the ground up

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Mariah Hagemann talks about water polo the way some people talk about a lifelong friend.

She grew up with the sport in Southern California, where pools were plentiful and teams seemed to exist every few miles. After moving to Arizona a decade ago, she was surprised to find few opportunities, especially in the West Valley.

Hagemann said she met her best friends in the water and wanted to create the same connections for athletes in Arizona.

"I love being in the pool, and I came out here and there was one team, there was nowhere close to play. I used to drive all the way into Mesa or Chandler to go to practice," Hagemann said. "So I have been eyeing pools in the West Valley to fix that."

That search led Hagemann to found the Phoenix Water Polo Club, now the only water polo pro-

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Goodyear and Litchfield Park expand spring events and invest in year-round arts venues. (James Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

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Officials remind residents to take precautions as wildlife activity increases. (Submitted photo/Wikimedia, Artix Kreiger)

Coyote sightings reported in Litchfield Park neighborhoods

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

City officials in Litchfield Park are reminding residents to remain cautious after recent reports of coyotes in residential areas.

While sightings may be surprising, officials said coyotes are a natural part of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem and are generally wary of people. However, feeding or approaching the animals can cause them to lose their natural fear of humans.

Residents who encounter a coyote should not approach or feed it and should keep children and pets safely indoors. If a coyote approaches, officials advise standing tall, waving arms and making loud noises to appear larger. Running away is discouraged, as it may trigger a chase response.

Pet owners are encouraged to keep animals on a leash, avoid walks at dawn and dusk when coyotes are most active, and refrain from leaving pet food or water outside overnight.

To reduce attractants, residents should secure garbage cans, collect fallen fruit and remove outdoor food sources such as bird seed. Small pets should be kept indoors, especially at night.

Litchfield Park breaks ground on new Heritage Center

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Community leaders, donors and residents gathered on the historic La Loma Hilltop to break ground on the new home of the P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center, marking a major step in the long-planned revitalization of the former estate of city founder Paul Weeks Litchfield.

Lisa Hagerty, representing the Heritage Center, called the ceremony a momentous occasion, years in the making.

"We couldn't be more excited," Hagerty said. "Not only are we breaking ground, we're also celebrating our organization's 25th anniversary. After years of dedication and work, we're about to expand and move into our new home, the goal



The P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center breaks ground to develop a cultural hub honoring Southwest Valley history. (James Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

we've been striving for since 2017."

The new museum will anchor redevelopment of the 20-acre La Loma Homestead, which was do-

nated to the city in 2008 by Edith and Wally Denny with the under-

• See **Heritage** on page 5

Seniors learn how to navigate artificial intelligence at Goodyear community center

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

At the Optum Community Center in Goodyear, seniors gathered this week for a class on a topic dominating headlines and reshaping daily life: artificial intelligence.

The workshop, led by operations manager Allen Gordon, aimed to help residents 55 and older understand what AI is, how it's used, and how to avoid scams tied to the fast-growing technology.

"My goal is to illustrate to our demographic how AI is present today, how they can recognize how it can be used to augment their life and things to watch out for in scams,"

Gordon said before the session.

The presentation is part of broader programming at the center, which focuses on physical fitness, emotional resiliency, cognitive stimulation and socialization. In addition to exercise classes and technology workshops, the location recently added on-site primary care services, allowing members to see a provider and attend classes in one place.

Gordon holds a master's degree in artificial intelligence from Arizona State University and an additional certification in generative AI through Microsoft. He said he switched his academic focus mid-program when ASU launched

its AI concentration.

He said older adults can be underserved when it comes to rapidly changing technology.

"With technology, there's a huge learning curve," Gordon said. "I want to make sure that the population that comes in, they walk away knowing exactly how to use it, how to recognize it, and how to leverage it themselves."

During the class, Gordon explained that AI already appears in common tools such as voice assistants like Siri and Alexa, as well as chatbots and generative programs such as ChatGPT and Google

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Heritage

• From page 4

standing it would benefit the broader community. The project includes restoration of the historic Litchfield/Denny House by developing it into a regional museum highlighting the history of Litchfield Park and neighboring Southwest Valley communities.

Hagerty said the Southwest Valley's story is one of the most impactful in Arizona, citing the region's agricultural roots, wartime aerospace industry and role in shaping the state's economy.

"We're proud to tell it," she said. "It's fascinating, it's varied, and it's rich. Not only will the Heritage Center ensure that this history is preserved, but we will continue to dig deeper, to collect overlooked stories from this region while incorporating arts and culture."

The Heritage Center, originally

founded in 2001 as the Litchfield Park Historical Society, expanded its mission in 2023 to serve as steward of the broader Southwest Valley's history, including Goodyear, Avondale and Tolleson.

The new home for the Heritage Center will be part of a larger cultural hub planned for the hilltop, alongside a Fine Arts Academy and Performing Arts Center in partnership with the Agua Fria Union High School District and a new branch library.

Plans for the new facility include seven exhibit galleries, a gift shop, a programming space, a work area, a catering kitchen, and a terrace with views of the Estrella Mountains. One gallery will replicate the original library and living room of the Litchfield home, complete with period furnishings and a 1935 mural.

Litchfield Park Mayor Thomas Schoaf said the groundbreaking represents a significant step not just for the museum, but for the city and sur-

rounding communities.

"We have the property because the Litchfield family wanted to make sure it was used in a way that was consistent with what Paul Litchfield envisioned back in the 1920s: a cultural and performing arts area," Schoaf said. "The heritage center stands as a powerful symbol, a symbol of vision, resilience and cultural richness."

Schoaf credited early donors and community advocates, including Ray and Bob McMillan, whose efforts helped secure a \$1 million lead gift that launched the capital campaign.

Joe Cilella, president and CEO of Sun Health, whose organization has supported the Heritage Center for two decades, said the project fulfills a long-held vision.

"This land matters. La Loma matters. P.W.'s vision matters. Edith and Wally's legacy matters," Cilella said. "While we break the ground, what we're really doing is taking a

step forward to becoming reality. The trust is being honored, the legacy is continuing."

He described the hilltop development as the cultural heart of the area.

"Great places do not happen by accident," Cilella said. "They happen by intentional design for purposeful human experience."

City officials said restoration work is expected to begin with first-phase improvements scheduled for completion by August 2026.

As ceremonial shovels turned the soil, Hagerty reflected on the responsibility shared by those in attendance.

"We believe the Heritage Center has enormous potential to build community identity and put our unique history on the map," she said. "Today is about more than turning dirt. It's about honoring the past and building something that will serve generations to come."

Visit pwlhc.org for more information.

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FROM THE COVER

Events

- From page 1

garden sponsored by Saddle Mountain Brewing Company.

Officials say the event reflects a broader effort across the West Valley to create public gathering spaces that foster a sense of belonging.

“I think it’s important to create a sense of community, and I think it’s important people feel pride in their community,” Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo said in a recent address. “When they feel pride in their community, they like going out and enjoying the events we have.”

Goodyear’s spring lineup continues Saturday, March 28 with Theater in the Park at Goodyear Civic Square, followed by Hop & Hops Easter Festival on Friday, April 3 at the Goodyear Recreation Campus, blending traditional egg hunts with beer gardens and local vendor booths.

On Saturday, April 25, families can gather for Movie in the Park featuring “Zootopia 2,” with food trucks, face painting and a mobile petting zoo.

In neighboring Litchfield Park, the season began with the annual Art & Wine Festival, where more than 125 artists from across the Southwest lined the streets surrounding Litchfield Square Park.

Later, the Arts in the Park concert series returns with the Thaddeus Rose Band performing on the lawn at The Wigwam.

Saturday, March 28, Easter in the Square will bring families to Litchfield Square Park for egg hunts, petting zoos and photos with the Easter Bunny.

Mesa-based artist Scott Palmer said festivals offer something galleries often cannot: direct connection.

“In galleries, I don’t get to meet

the people buying my work,” Palmer said. “Here, it’s direct access to the customer.”

City officials say that connection is central to the purpose of public events.

“Community gatherings have grown into community and family traditions,” said Litchfield Park Councilmember Lisa Brainard Watson during the city’s State of the City address. “Leadership isn’t just about making decisions for the community. It’s also about being engaged and responsive to the needs of the community.”

The emphasis on events is increasingly paired with long-term investment in cultural infrastructure.

In fall 2026, Litchfield Park will add a major anchor to its arts and entertainment footprint with the opening of The Hilltop School for the Arts and its adjoining 700-seat performing arts

theater, along with a new Maricopa County Library District branch at the historic La Loma Homestead. City leaders say the campus is intended to function not only as an educational center but as a year-round destination for performances, public programming and community gatherings.

City leaders say the redevelopment transforms a once-underutilized hillside into a cultural hub and reflects how entertainment in the West Valley is evolving beyond weekend festivals to sustained venues.

The theater will host student productions as well as community arts events, while the expanded library

will feature dedicated program space for lectures, workshops and performances together with the planned P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center.

Litchfield Park Mayor Thomas Schoaf said the site signals a broader regional trend: as West Valley cities grow, they are investing not only in retail and dining, but in arts, education and cultural experiences.

That momentum has been building across the region.

In Goodyear, festivals transform Goodyear Ballpark into a celebration of the city, the residents and their traditions.

“(This) is more than just an event,” Councilmember Benita Beckles told

attendees at a Hispanic Heritage festival. “It’s a celebration of heritage and community, an invitation to learn, to appreciate, and to enjoy the diversity that makes Goodyear such a special place to live.”

For small business owners like Lorena González, who sells handmade soaps sourced from her family’s workshop in Mexico, city events provide exposure and economic opportunity.

“It’s fabulous — the music, the dancing, everything,” González said. “It reminds me of home. People from everywhere come to see our products.”

Goodyear Vice Mayor Brannon Hampton said these gatherings help preserve the city’s identity amid rapid growth.

“When we celebrate... it really just unites and brings our community together,” Hampton said.

Both cities have emphasized that events serve a larger strategy. Public festivals activate downtown districts,

introduce residents to new retail and restaurant offerings, and reinforce public investment in parks and civic spaces. Pizzillo said residents have consistently asked for more amenities and entertainment options.

“The residents have made it clear they want more amenities. They want more retail, more entertainment,” he said. “We will continue building our downtown area and bringing businesses to the city for our residents to enjoy.”

In Litchfield Park, officials describe the events and upcoming venues as extensions of the city’s small-town character.

“Life here is simple on purpose,” Watson said. “Beautiful public spaces, celebrated history, and a full slate of community traditions wrapped in that small-town ease everyone hopes to find.”

As West Valley communities continue to expand, leaders say shared experiences, whether on a lawn chair at a spring concert or in a future theater seat overlooking the hilltop, remain central to maintaining connection.

For Goodyear resident Nico Hamilton, the impact is personal.

“I haven’t always been able to connect with the community as much as I’d like,” Hamilton said. “These events help me do that, the food, the vendors, the performances. It’s a great way to support each other.”

From blues sets at Litchfield’s Art & Wine Festival to pop-rock at Estrella Lakeside, and soon to full theatrical productions on a permanent West Valley stage, cities are betting that music, art and shared public space will continue to anchor community life, even as the region grows around them.

Visit goodyearaz.gov and litchfieldpark.gov for more information on upcoming events.

“I think it’s important to create a sense of community, and I think it’s important people feel pride in their community,” Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo said in a recent address. When they feel pride in their community, they like going out and enjoying the events we have.”

Joe Pizzillo
Goodyear mayor

AI

• From page 4

Gemini.

He described AI as a probability-based system trained on large amounts of data.

“AI does not have feelings. It follows patterns and data,” he told attendees. “It is your assistant. It is meant to augment and make things more efficient, but it is not supposed to give you the one perfect answer.”

Gordon led with practical uses, like scheduling and producing recipes or shopping lists. He also gave examples of AI assisting in health care by helping analyze medical images or transcribe notes.

“We do not want to rely on AI to diagnose us,” he said. “We want our provider and our professionals to be the ones having the last say.”

He also urged participants to verify information and avoid sharing sensitive personal data.

“We want to make sure that we fact-check everything,” he said.

For John Placko, the class offered practical guidance rather than alarm.

Placko, who joined the community center about a year and a half ago after a friend recommended it, attends exercise classes with his wife several times a week.

He said he attended the second AI session to better understand how to use the technology. Placko has experimented with ChatGPT and Google Gemini and said the workshop helped him to refine how he asks questions.

“I think I learned to use (AI) better, and I learned that it’s more integrated already than I thought,” he said.

With a background in health care, Placko said verifying information is already part of his routine.

“If something comes up, I go back to the original sources to see what they have to say,” he said. “That’s one of the things I talked about in



Local AI workshop focuses on practical uses, scam awareness, and building confidence for Goodyear seniors. John Placko, above, attends the classes. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

class today. We need to validate the data.”

Unlike some of his peers, he said AI itself does not intimidate him.

“It’s not really scary, especially when Allen describes it as augmenting tasks and not replacing people” he said. “I think social media intimi-

dates me more than AI, because that’s where the false information gets distributed across a broader land. That’s where AI picks it up from.”

Beyond the technology lessons, Placko said the center’s sense of community keeps him and his wife returning.

“There’s very little judgment in the group here,” he said. “We’ve met a lot of people that we never would have met if we hadn’t come here.”

Gordon said connection is central to the center’s mission.

“We want it to be a home away from home for all of our members,” he said.

As AI continues to evolve, he said his goal is empowerment, not fear.

“The goal for me today is really to have everybody walk away with new points of knowledge and a new level of understanding,” Gordon said, “and then walk away with confidence on how to use it and also know exactly when not to use it.”

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New coffee shop features aviation-themed space and marks fourth West Valley location. (Submitted photo/Peter Madrid)

Bebida Express opens at Flite Goodyear campus

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Bebida Express opened a new coffee shop on the Flite Goodyear campus, featuring an aviation-themed space that includes a secluded garden with ponds, fountains, walkways and seating.

The opening marks the company's fourth location in the West Valley. Its other sites operate within the Estrella master-planned community, including Lakeside Grill at Starpointe Residents' Club, Café Bebida at the Welcome Center and The Cantina at Presidio Residents' Club.

"Our goal has always been to create spaces where people feel welcome and connected to their community," said Deborah Huyer, the company's owner. "Goodyear is a vibrant and growing city, and we're excited to bring our coffee experience to the area."

Bebida Express serves espresso drinks, brewed coffee, specialty beverages, pastries, salads, wraps and toasted sandwiches. The shop is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The newest Bebida Express is located at 1300 S. Litchfield Road, in Building 220's lobby.

Homeless Youth Connection marks 15 years with Goodyear reunion

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Homeless Youth Connection marked its 15th anniversary with a reunion, drawing early supporters, staff and community partners to Goodyear, where the nonprofit began.

The event brought together founder Larry Cervarich, employees and longtime advocates for coffee and conversation as they reflected on the organization's growth from a small volunteer effort into a multi-county nonprofit serving hundreds of students each year.

Founded in 2010, HYC was created after Cervarich read about the challenges facing homeless high school students in the West Valley. Working with his Rotary club and a local church, he began helping students at Agua Fria High School meet basic needs so they could stay in school.

"When I first went to a school and said I was interested in helping homeless youth, the counselor looked at me like nobody was interested in them," Cervarich said. "But they're there. They're going to school every day, and you may never know what they're going home to."

Cervarich said he encountered teens living in abandoned homes, vehicles and other unstable conditions while attending classes. He recalled one student who did homework by flashlight in a home without electricity and later graduated.

"The day we saw him walk across the stage with a cap and gown, smiling and waving, you couldn't help but feel tears," Cervarich said.

During the 2024-25 school year, the organization supported more than



Julie Rewerts, left, unidentified, Jeannette Cruz and Kate Blosser reflect on 15 years of growth with New Life Center. (James Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

700 students, including 129 seniors who graduated and went on to college, careers or military service. HYC partners with more than 130 high schools in Maricopa and Coconino counties, according to the organization.

Robin Telle, the nonprofit's community engagement manager, told the Daily Independent that helping students graduate remains its central goal.

"Our overall mission is to help these young people graduate from high school," Telle said. "We help them navigate barriers that could interrupt their education, whether that's not having a laptop, lacking transportation or not having access to health care."

Julie Rewerts, a youth coach who has been with HYC since its early days, said the anniversary marked both a personal and professional milestone.

When she joined the nonprofit 15 years ago, she said, it was still defining its structure. She previously worked at a school and chose HYC over another job offer because she felt drawn to the mission.

"It kind of tugged at my heart," Rewerts said.

In the beginning, she said, there was little formal structure.

"We didn't really have a job description," she said. "We were just figuring out what students needed and how to help."

As the organization expanded, so did its programs. Efforts that began with informal housing assistance evolved into a host family program that matches youth with volunteer families who provide temporary housing and support.

Rewerts said the core of the work remains the same: helping students build stable, self-sufficient futures.

"Every case is different. Every student is different," she said. "You go in, figure out what needs to be done, and help them do it."

She recalled a student who initially struggled to speak because of trauma. Years later, Rewerts attended the former student's wedding and met her child. The woman has since shared her story publicly as a speaker for HYC.

Organization leaders said community donations and volunteers have sustained its growth over the past 15 years.

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Q&A: Goodyear councilmember talks national appointment, water and energy policy

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Goodyear Councilmember Laura Kaino has been appointed to the Energy, Environment and Natural Resources Committee of the National League of Cities.

In a recent interview, Kaino discussed why she sought the role and how it could affect Goodyear residents.

Q: Why did you seek the appointment?

A: "These topics, infrastructure, water, energy, environment, they're really relevant in Arizona right now. I think we're going to see a lot more discussion even in the city council about it, different entities wanting to do business."

"I'm seeking to learn more about energy and water as they grow to be bigger and bigger issues locally, not just nationally."

Q: What does your new role involve?

A: "In theory, I'll be helping to shape policy, advocating at the federal level and shaping that dialogue. I think it will be a really interesting experience."

Q: What can Goodyear contribute to the national discussion?

A: "Goodyear has been a very good steward of water. I have an idea of the things (our water professionals) think about, and how they're looking at water and anticipating changes. We've banked a lot of water underground. I think that planning in advance and anticipating need is how we can contribute to conversations at the national level."

Q: How does your experience add to your perspective?

A: "Before I was elected, I was on a citizens water committee. Through



Goodyear Councilmember Laura Kaino has been appointed to the Energy, Environment and Natural Resources Committee of the National League of Cities. (Submitted photo/City of Goodyear)

that discussion, we came up with 10 very sound conservation items that Goodyear could implement. Over time the city did implement everything. I think that demonstrates the role of residents and the citizens in getting involved."

"I'm hoping that those constructive conversations are similar to the ones I'll be having in this committee."

Q: How are water and energy connected?

A: "I'm finding that water and energy are overlapping more than I thought initially. The thing that everyone wants to talk about there is data centers. There's so much growing resident pushback on data centers

in the belief that they take up all the water and that our power bills are going up because of them."

"In Goodyear, most of the data centers don't use water cooling, and they are not putting any of those costs on the backs of current users, especially not residential."

Q: How do you hope local perspectives might impact national policy?

A: "I'm going in asking about how we ensure that Arizona has the best energy that it needs, and then what are the impacts on communities? There are several leaders from around the state joining me in the committee, together we have some kind of

expertise."

"Outside of that, we all know that the Colorado River is in some big distress. I definitely would want to advocate for a resolution to the Colorado River, which doesn't cost Arizona its entire allotment."

Q: What do you hope to bring back home to Goodyear?

A: "I'm really interested to see what other municipalities are doing. I'm looking forward to learning more about how communities across the country are adapting to the growing issues at hand and then seeing what I can bring back and apply to Goodyear. And at some point, I'll have to do a good job explaining what I learned to the residents. I'm going to learn it, then pass it all along."

Kaino is one of three members of the Goodyear City Council have been appointed to leadership and committee positions with the National League of Cities.

Vice Mayor Wally Campbell has been appointed vice chair of the NLC's 2026 First Tier Suburbs Council. She will serve a one-year term helping guide programming and policy discussions for communities similar in size and demographics to Goodyear.

Councilwoman Vicki Gillis was reappointed to the NLC Public Safety and Crime Prevention Federal Advocacy Committee for a second consecutive one-year term. The committee provides strategic direction for the organization's federal advocacy agenda on issues including disaster preparedness and recovery, community-oriented policing, violence prevention, emergency communications and federal grant programs for first responders. Visit nlc.org for more information."

Local food bank reports surge in demand for services

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank saw a nearly 15% increase in families seeking emergency food assistance in 2025, as rising costs, employment disruptions and interruptions in public benefits pushed more households to seek help across the southwest Valley.

The faith-based nonprofit, which serves residents throughout Avondale, Goodyear and surrounding areas said demand climbed steadily throughout the year, with many clients visiting the food bank for the first time.

"People are working and doing everything they can, and it's still not enough," said Executive Director Leanne Leonard, who has led the organization for 10 years. "We're seeing neighbors who have never needed assistance before walking through our doors."

One of the organization's most utilized services is its Daily Lunch Sacks program for unsheltered neighbors. In 2025, the food bank distributed a record number of lunch sacks, serving more than 1,700 additional meals compared with the previous year. Each sack includes a protein or main dish, granola bar, fruit snack, fresh fruit, dessert, chips or crackers, bottled water and an additional beverage.

Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank also expanded support through its Baby Care Program, which serves 25 infants each month with diapers, wipes and formula. As children grow, families receive additional items such as rice cereal, baby food and 100% apple juice. The program maintained a waitlist of about 10 babies throughout the year.

"Our goal is to support parents and guardians during incredibly vulnerable moments," Leonard said. "Providing



Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank expands meal, infant care and mobile pantry programs as economic pressures drive more families to seek help. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

essentials helps promote healthy development and gives families peace of mind."

To supplement its emergency food boxes, the organization hosts mobile food pantries on the first and third Saturdays of each month at Barbara Robey

Elementary School. The pantries provide additional groceries to help families stretch food supplies when a single box is not enough.

Founded nearly 30 years ago, Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank provides food, clothing and support services to about 50,000 people annually. The organization reports that nearly 2 million Arizonans experience food insecurity each year, and one in three children in the state lives in poverty. Leonard said the surge in demand has intensified the need for consistent volunteers during regular operating hours.

"We have two paid staff members," she said. "Everything else is powered by volunteers, and steady help is critical to keeping services available."

More information about Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank, including ways to donate or volunteer, is available at afbcb.org.

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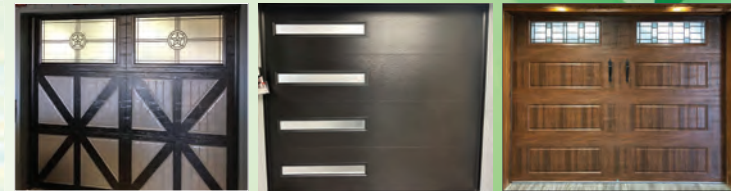
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BUSINESS MOVES



1 Java Autism Services

Java Autism Services opened a Goodyear location to offer Applied Behavior Analysis therapy that strengthen communication, social and self-care skills of children diagnosed with Autism.

2970 North Litchfield Road, Suite 110, Goodyear

2 Angry Chickz

Angry Chickz opens a new restaurant serving Nashville-style hot chicken in Goodyear, marking the chain's first location in the city.

883 S. Cotton Lane, Suite 129, Goodyear

3 Milk & Honey Coffee

A locally owned café opens in Litchfield Park intended to serve as a gathering place for residents, offering a faith-based atmosphere alongside a menu of coffees and teas.

107 W. Honeysuckle, Litchfield Park.

4 Family Care Center

Family Care Center opened its fifth Arizona location, providing accessible and compassionate behavioral health care for individuals and families in the West Valley.

1616 N. Litchfield Road, Suite 270, Goodyear

5 First Watch

First Watch is now open in GSQ, featuring made-to-order meals prepared without deep fryers, microwaves or heat lamps, according to the company.

1670 N. Bullard Ave., Goodyear

6 Abrazo Litchfield Medical Building

The 24-bed inpatient rehabilitation hospital provides recovery services for patients following traumatic injuries, cardiovascular surgery, stroke and advanced spine care.

1375 N. Litchfield Road, Goodyear

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Goodyear eyes federal funds to help residents avoid eviction

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Local officials are considering using federal housing funds next year to help residents stay in their homes through eviction prevention services provided by a potential investment in a Goodyear-based nonprofit.

The city council reviewed a draft four-year Community Development Block Grant plan that would prioritize housing stability, tenant education, and home repairs for vulnerable households.

The program provides cities with annual federal funding to support housing, public services and neighborhood improvements for low- and moderate-income residents. The money comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and must be spent under federal guidelines that limit how much can go toward administration and public services.

For fiscal year 2027, city staff recommended directing about \$62,000 in CDBG funding to Gervonni Cares, a Goodyear-based nonprofit that helps tenants facing eviction through education, mediation and court support.

The funding would be part of the city's expected annual allocation of roughly \$415,000 in federal housing dollars.

Christina Panaitescu, the city's community partnerships program manager, said eviction prevention services can make a critical difference for residents facing short-term crises.

"It's not that people don't have the money," said Panaitescu. "It's that they don't have the time, and they need the time to be able to get the money together."

She said the broader four-year plan is meant to give the city flexibility as housing needs evolve.

"The consolidated plan provides the framework for how the city is going to



City proposes using Community Development Block Grant dollars for tenant education, mediation and home repairs. (James Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

use its federal housing dollars," Panaitescu said, adding that staff want to "keep all of the options on the table" as needs and opportunities change.

Gervonni Cares executive director Gervonni Sherrod told council the organization served more than 1,500 residents last year, including nearly 600 Goodyear residents, and that many eviction cases stem from improperly issued notices or payments that are not properly credited.

"People don't always have the time or knowledge to navigate the system," Sherrod Leggett said. "We provide education and support so families can stay housed."

Under federal rules, up to 15% of CDBG funds may be used for public services such as eviction prevention, while up to 20% may be used for program administration.

The proposed fiscal year 2027-30 Consolidated Plan would identify community facilities, public services, program administration, and attainable housing as high priorities. Economic development activities would remain a lower priority.

In addition to eviction prevention, staff recommended restarting an owner-occupied home rehabilitation program to help low- and moderate-income homeowners make critical repairs. Residents and stakeholders also identified needs such as sidewalk improvements.



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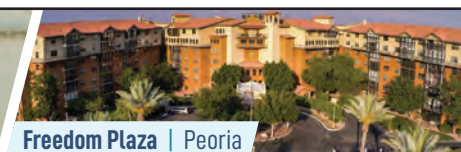
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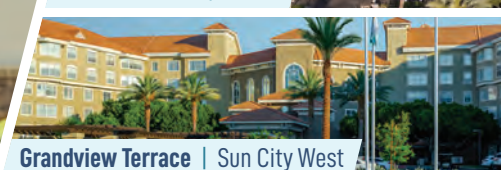
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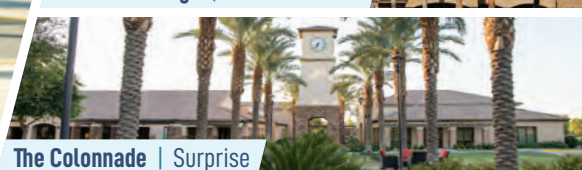
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EDUCATION

'Permission Granted' guides schools to adapt learning experiences

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Arizona school leaders often say state policy limits how much they can change schedules, staffing models or early college access programs.

A new program is aiming to highlight changes schools and districts can make to everything from the school day to early college readiness in a push to get educators to engage in better solutions for students.

The initiative, called "Permission Granted," was unveiled at Goodyear High School by the Center for the Future of Arizona and the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy at Northern Arizona University, with support from KnowledgeWorks. The effort includes two public tools, a policy primer and an innovation guide. Organizers say the goal is to help officials at places such as the Agua Fria Union High School District identify what is permitted under Arizona law and to see how other school systems are applying those flexibilities.

What the tools include

The Policy Primer translates Arizona education statutes into plain language and identifies five key policy areas where schools have flexibility. Those areas include:

- Rethinking instructional time models
- Redesigning how the school day is structured
- Expanding early college access
- Leveraging technology, including artificial intelligence
- Supporting new approaches to staffing and postsecondary readiness

The document is intended to clarify where districts have discretion to redesign learning, staffing and schedules without waiting for new legislation.



Agua Fria schools model an initiative that helps districts use education policy flexibility. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

The guide provides case studies from 11 Arizona school systems that are tackling those areas in different ways under current state law. The selected districts and charter networks represent different regions, school models and student populations.

According to organizers, the examples were identified through stakeholder interviews and prior work with systems across the state. Each spotlight was reviewed by the district involved.

The Agua Fria district is among those featured.

"Sometimes we get so caught up in meetings and adult conversations that we forget why we're here," Superintendent Mark Yslas said during the launch event in Goodyear. "Seeing our students reminds us of the urgency of this work. That's what this is about."

The guide documents how some schools and districts are restructuring the school day, expanding dual enrollment and early college pathways, and incorporating technology-based learning within existing law.

Why organizers say it's needed

Dr. Sybil Francis, president and

• See **Adapt** on page 15

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Adapt

• From page 14

CEO of the Center for the Future of Arizona, said schools sometimes delay redesign efforts because leaders believe state approval is required.

“There’s often a perception that meaningful change requires new policy,” Francis said. “But Arizona already has significant flexibility. ‘Permission Granted’ brings clarity and confidence to that reality and helps move us from aspiration to implementation.”

Dr. Chad Gestson, executive director of the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy, said the effort is intended to address both uncertainty and urgency.

“‘Permission Granted’ is both permission and a push,” Gestson said. “You have permission by law today in Arizona to innovate. But this also a push, because our students cannot wait.”

Gestson said the organization

gathered feedback across all 15 Arizona counties while developing the resource. That feedback included discussions about how artificial intelligence and workforce changes are affecting expectations for high school graduates.

The materials also highlight early college access as one strategy available under current policy. Dr. Tiffany Hernandez, president of Glendale Community College, said dual enrollment programs allow students to earn college credit while in high school.

“Dual enrollment is one of the most powerful tools we have,” Hernandez said. “Students who participate are more than twice as likely to attend and succeed in college.”

Organizers say the initiative does not propose new legislation. Instead, it focuses on helping school leaders understand and apply existing statutory flexibility.

The resources are available online at PermissionGrantedAZ.org.

ON YOURVALLEY.NET

Hilltop School for the Arts and Theater marks construction milestone

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Agua Fria High School District marked a construction milestone for the new Hilltop School for the Arts and Theater with a beam-signing ceremony and the placement of the project’s final structural beam.

The event, commonly known as a topping-out ceremony, signifies completion of a building’s structural framework. District officials were joined by representatives of McCarthy Building Companies, the project’s general contractor, and ADM Group, the designer, along with local leaders and community members.

The 115,111-square-foot campus is being built at Litchfield Road and Camelback Road.



Hilltop School for the Arts and Theater hosts a beam ceremony. (Submitted photo/Patty Johnson)

Plans include a 34,034-square-foot performing arts center with more than 700 seats, lobby space and a two-story backstage area with multi-use rooms and a food service area.

Visit aguafria.org for more information.

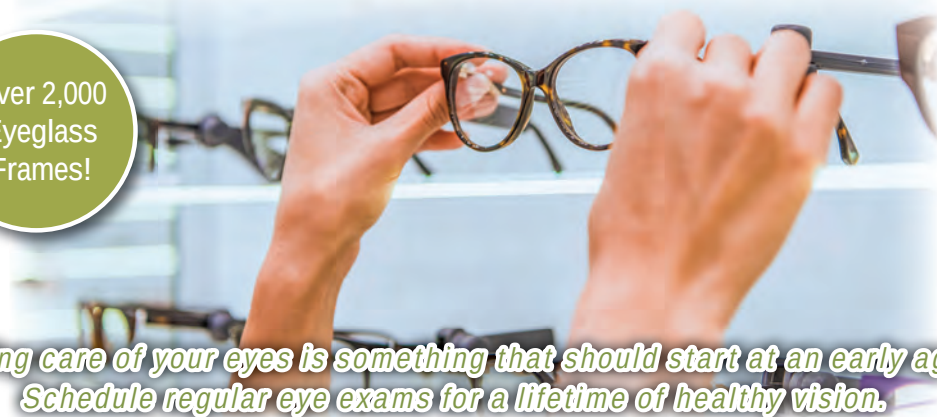
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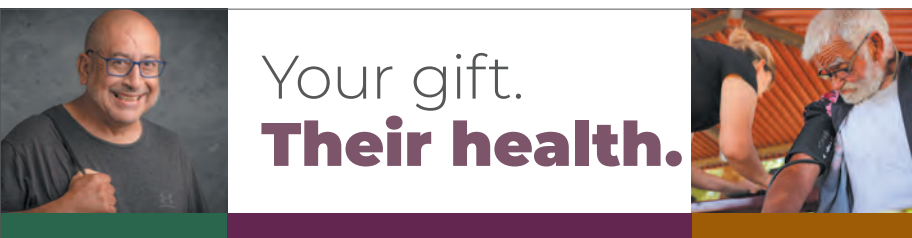
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Litchfield Elementary explores options to address a projected budget shortfall. (Submitted photo/Sam Nunez)

Litchfield Elementary board considers teacher reductions amid budget crunch

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Litchfield Elementary School District is considering reducing up to 27 teaching positions as part of efforts to address a projected budget shortfall.

The district is exploring multiple other options to preserve the budget, including reductions in district office expenses, class size adjustments in specialized programs, and staffing changes in both certified and classified support roles. Full-day kindergarten and other benefits remain under review.

Chief Financial Officer Michael J. Vaughn, CPA, presented proposals showing the potential impact of increasing class sizes.

Under one scenario, tightening staffing and enrollment changes would account for eight teaching positions, with nine more positions affected by raising the target class size. A more aggressive proposal could affect 27 teachers, with 19 positions tied to class size adjustments.

Vaughn said the plans aim to “narrow the range of ‘appropriate’ sized classrooms” while keeping average

class sizes closer to the district's current board-approved targets.

The board spent much of Monday's meeting debating the trade-offs between larger class sizes and possible adjustments to teacher pay, reducing 2% raises to 1.5%.

Some members emphasized that student achievement remains the district's top priority.

“Student success and student achievement has to come first, and I think that if it's this or the class sizes, that's where I choose,” said board member Michele Wallace.

Board member Ryan Owens highlighted the difficult balance administrators face between classroom size and compensation. “I've gotten two messages from teachers that would prefer smaller classrooms to an (pay) increase... We've talked about some people are going to want smaller classrooms. This decision is going to affect everybody,” he said.

After the over four hour-long meeting, no final decisions were made. The conversation will continue at follow-up meetings.

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Plain White T's to headline Goodyear Lakeside Music Festival

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The "Plain White T's" will headline this year's Goodyear Lakeside Music Festival, city officials announced.

The annual event will take place March 21 from 4:00 to 10:00 p.m. at the Estrella Lakeside Amphitheater and is free and open to the public.

The Chicago-based pop rock band is best known for its 2006 hit "Hey There Delilah," which topped the Billboard Hot 100 and earned two Grammy nominations. Formed in 1997, the group has released multiple albums, including a self-titled record in 2023.

Additional performers include "Hyperbella," a Neo-Soul group, "Plum," a rock band, "Honeygirl," playing country and "Sundressed," with an alternative sound.

Organizers say the event will fea-



A free annual event returns to Estrella Lakeside Amphitheater with live music, vendors and family activities. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

ture live music throughout the afternoon and evening, along with an artisan vendor market, local food trucks, lawn games and a children's zone. A beer garden sponsored by Saddle Mountain Brewing Company also will be available.

The festival has become a recurring

spring event for the city, drawing visitors from across the valley.

In 2025, the Lakeside Music Festival drew hundreds of attendees for a lineup headlined by Arizona native and "American Idol" winner Jordin Sparks, along with performances by local and regional acts

IF YOU GO

What: Goodyear Lakeside Music Festival

About: Goodyear puts on a family friendly music festival featuring six bands.

When: 4 - 10 p.m. on Saturday, March 21.

Where: Estrella Lakeside Amphitheater, 10300 S Estrella Pkwy, Goodyear, 85338

across genres including jazz, mariachi and rock.

Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizillo said the event is made possible through collaboration among city staff and community partners.

Visit goodyearaz.gov for more information.



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Classic car enthusiasts plan monthly showcase in Litchfield Park

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Classic and project car enthusiasts gather monthly in Litchfield Park for a community showcase hosted by the Park Car Club.

The informal event is held from 8 to 11 a.m. on the third Saturday of each month at Litchfield Square, 100 N. Old Litchfield Road, near the intersection of Honeysuckle Street and Old Litchfield Road.

Upcoming dates include March 21, April 18 and May 16.

Residents are invited to display classic cars, custom builds and other unique projects. Motorcycles and three-wheeled vehicles also are welcome. Organizers say the gathering offers an opportunity for neighbors to connect over a shared interest in vintage and specialty vehicles.

No meetings will be held in June, July or August.

Visit litchfieldpark.gov for more information.



Park Car Club gathering brings neighbors together at Litchfield Square. (Submitted photo/Metro Creative Connection)

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Tanner Lange and Haskell Fagan compete with USA Diving at American Cup international competitions. (Submitted photo/Jennifer Brown)

Goodyear divers selected for Team USA at national events

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Two athletes from the YMCA Silver Fins Diving Team in Goodyear have been selected by USA Diving to represent the United States at upcoming American Cup international competitions.

Silver Fins head coach Bill Hunter said the selections reflect the athletes' training and dedication.

"Their work ethic, courage, and commitment to excellence continue to set them apart, and they are outstanding representatives of both our program and Team USA," Hunter said.

Fifteen-year-old Tanner Lange will compete in the Senior American Cup high dive on the 20-meter platform April 18-19 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The event is part of the World Aquatics Grand Prix series and is expected to draw competitors from multiple countries.

Lange began diving at age 9 with the Silver Fins and competed inter-

nationally for the first time at 12, according to the team. He is the reigning USA Diving junior national champion in the 14-16 age group in high dive.

Haskell Fagan, age 11, was selected to compete in the Junior American Cup scheduled for May 21-24 in Mission Viejo, California. The junior competition is sanctioned by World Aquatics and features youth divers from several nations.

Fagan began diving at age 9 through the Silver Fins homeschool program. In 2025, he won an AAU national title and later earned podium finishes at a junior meet in Aachen, Germany, according to the team.

The 2026 American Cup will feature Olympic diving disciplines alongside 20 and 27 meter high diving. It will take place between April 16 and 19 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Visit ywsfdiving.org for more information.

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Litchfield Park outlines multimillion-dollar development plan at State of the City

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Litchfield Park officials discussed their expansive development plan during the annual State of the City address, headlined by a 45% increase in the municipal budget to fund a series of capital projects scheduled through 2026.

Mayor Thomas Schoaf and members of the city council detailed the transformation of the city's core, focusing on the multi-use Litchfield Square and the Hilltop cultural campus. Despite the increased spending, Schoaf stated the city remains in a fiscally positive condition with a general fund unassigned balance of \$16.2 million.

"The city takes a conservative approach towards forecasting and revenues, expenditures, and debt," Schoaf said. "This ensures a fiscally positive condition for our city."

The centerpiece of the city's economic strategy, Litchfield Square, is moving into its vertical construction phase.

The 25-acre project is designed to be a walkable urban center featuring retail, restaurants, and office spaces. The first development, a 40,000-square-foot building known as Heritage Place, is expected to see tenants move in this spring.

Schoaf noted the city spent decades planning the downtown area to ensure the architectural style remained consistent with the community's history.

"It is not a cookie cutter development that can be put up in a matter of months," Schoaf said. "We are looking for very specific



Officials project major growth for Litchfield Square and Hilltop cultural campus. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

buildings to be built here to fit into a specific lifestyle that we enjoy in the park."

Beyond the downtown core, Council Member Suzanne Allen highlighted the renewal of the 21-acre Rancho La Loma homestead, the former retreat of city founder Paul W. Litchfield. Now called the Hilltop, the site will house the Hilltop School for the Arts.

"The site is rapidly transforming into a dynamic destination and cultural hub for the Southwest Valley," Allen said.

Infrastructure and public safety were also addressed. Vice Mayor

Paul Faith noted that the city has budgeted for a new traffic control officer to address speeding concerns.

Planned road improvements include a redesign of Camelback Road and a pedestrian underpass on Litchfield Road.

"Studies show roundabouts reduce overall crash numbers up to 40% and reduce the likelihood of life-threatening crashes," Faith said.

The council also addressed a pending rate increase request from Liberty Water. If approved by the Arizona Corporation Commission,

residents could see water rates increase by 38.4% and wastewater rates by 53.76% as early as third-quarter 2026.

Council Member Brainard Watson described the city's philosophy as maintaining a high quality of life through aesthetics and curated programming.

"All told, life here is simple on purpose," Watson said. "Beautiful public spaces, celebrated history, and a full slate of community traditions wrapped in that small town ease everyone hopes to find."

Visit litchfieldpark.gov for more information.

NEIGHBORS

Goodyear resident recognized as Citizen of the Year

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

As food bank lines grow longer, Goodyear officials honored three community leaders working to meet that challenge through collaboration, service and private-sector partnership.

The city named Jeremiah Smith as Citizen of the Year, the meal delivery company Factor as Corporate Citizen of the Year and high school junior Shyanne Blair as Youth of the Year, recognizing efforts that span homelessness prevention, food insecurity and youth civic engagement.

Sustaining homeless services

Smith, a longtime Good-

year resident and nonprofit consultant, was recognized for helping stabilize and strengthen community-based organizations, including efforts that helped preserve the Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program, which provides temporary shelter and support for people experiencing homelessness.

When the program faced the loss of funding, Smith worked to secure financial backing and helped the organization hire a program manager to keep operations running. Faith-based partners said his ability to connect people, identify funding

• See **Citizen** on page 23



Goodyear names Jeremiah Smith as Citizen of the Year. (Submitted photo/City of Goodyear, Corinne Holliday)

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Four Fun Facts About Feet



John Prothro, CEO of Foot Solutions.

you wore in college, chances are your feet are getting squeezed by footwear that is too small. Look out for bunions, neuromas, and calluses!

Fun fact: babies have flat feet because they have fat pads where arches will eventually develop.

2. Feet are complex machines. It's easy to take for granted that your feet carry you around every day and function as needed. But feet are exceptionally complex. Each foot has 26 bones, 33 joints, 100 liga-

ments, tendons, and muscles, and over 250,000 sweat glands. This complexity is why Leonard Davinci called the foot a "masterpiece" and "a work of art".

3. Your feet are different. Most people have one foot that is larger than the other by at least a half a shoe size, and arch depths vary from one foot to the other. These differences add to the stress of the body as it compensates for foundational variations. Foot Solutions real custom orthotics solve for these differences. However, if your feet are very similar, we may recommend one of our high quality, off-the-shelf insoles engineered in partnership with a German medical device company.

4. Foot problems can lead to

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If you want to see for yourself how Foot Solutions solves foot and joint pain, come by for a free assessment at one of our local stores, or book an appointment online at www.footso-lutions.com.

-John Prothro is the CEO of Foot Solutions, a global foot health retailer with locally owned stores in Peoria, Goodyear, Surprise, Mesa, Scottsdale, Tucson, and North Phoenix.

Foot Solutions retail stores are staffed with highly-trained foot health experts, lovingly known as "foot geeks". We aren't ashamed of that label. We love helping our neighbors stay happy and healthy on their feet with real custom orthotics and supportive footwear.

To be a foot geek you need to study what makes feet special. To that end, here are four fun facts about feet:

1. Feet grow as you age. Every time you step, you put 1.5X your body weight on your feet. Running is about twice that. Over time, this pressure takes its toll, and your feet expand and lengthen from ligament relaxation and gravity. If you are over 40 and still wearing the shoe size

NEIGHBORS

Speak Up

Here are some comments about stories happening in your area:

LOCAL NEWS

Coyote sightings

"Secure your pets and don't leave them out unsupervised! And stop feeding the neighborhood cats!" — **Vinnie Alvarez** via Nextdoor

Municipal support of eviction prevention nonprofit

"I think it's great idea! Secure communities keep everyone safe. You can get an eviction notice on 10 days late. So if you lose your job there wouldn't be enough time to find a new job and get your first check before getting kicked out. I much rather my tax dollars go towards things like this!" — **Heather Burton-Harris** via Nextdoor

Camelback Road traffic safety - Arizona Senate approves ballot measure to alter voting

"No one wants to claim responsibility of this section, but with the school and La Loma developments, a light at Litchfield and Missouri would improve safety." — **Erik Noce** via Nextdoor

Anticipated Buc-ee's traffic

"Increased traffic can lead to more congestion, which in turn may contribute to an increase in crime and road rage. It can be frustrating to deal with these challenges." — **Laurel Powers** via Nextdoor



Kassie Silva and representatives from the West Valley Arts Council and Catitude Arts unveil a mural at Pluto Energy Storage Center. (James Goldmeer/Independent News-media)

Goodyear high school senior awarded \$10,000 scholarship

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Kassie Silva, a Goodyear high school student, was awarded a \$10,000 scholarship after being selected as the winning artist in a community mural competition tied to the opening of the Pluto Energy Storage Center.

Silva, a senior at Trivium Preparatory Academy, was recognized during a public ceremony marking the launch of the new energy storage facility developed by NextEra Energy Resources in partnership with Arizona Public Service, the city of Goodyear, and the West Valley Arts Council. Her mural was unveiled at the site as part of the celebration.

Speaking to city leaders, energy officials and community members, Silva reflected on art as a guide

through personal growth and change.

"Art was present in every low and high that I have experienced," Silva said. "As we grow as a community, it is vital to grow beyond the boundaries."

Silva said the mural's bright colors and small stars represent her journey navigating art and life, and are meant to encourage intentional growth and resilience.

"Growth is scary, but to be stagnant is the deprivation of any growth at all," she said. "Change cannot be stopped, but we can shape it for the better."

The scholarship recognition builds on Silva's broader body of work exploring identity, culture and storytelling. Earlier this year, she earned first place at a regional youth fine art exhibition for a portfolio examining Filipino culture through a contem-

porary lens. Her ribbon-winning piece was a portrait dedicated to her grandmother, blending modern imagery with traditional elements.

"The idea was to show how our traditions live on, even as the world changes around us," Silva said.

In addition to visual art, Silva is active in theater and scenic design and plans to continue both disciplines when she begins her studies at Arizona State University next year.

"Art and theater go hand in hand," she said. "They both tell stories and build immersive worlds."

Silva said receiving the scholarship affirms her belief in using creativity with purpose and intention.

"This was more than just art for me," she said. "It was about being true to myself and sharing something meaningful with my community."

Citizen

• From page 21

sources and fill operational gaps allowed the program to continue serving vulnerable residents.

“Nonprofit work is all I’ve ever done,” Smith said in a recorded message. “If I get to be part of helping to build healthy nonprofits in this place where I live, I believe that’s going to contribute to creating the place that I want to be a part of.”

City leaders described his approach as emblematic of a broader strategy in Goodyear, bringing together municipal officials, faith organizations and nonprofit leaders to address emerging needs before programs disappear.

Private-sector response to food insecurity

The Corporate Citizen of the Year award went to Factor, ready to eat meals, for its efforts to reduce food waste while expanding access to meals.

In November 2025, the company donated three fully stocked refrigerated vans to local food bank partners, including All Faith Community Services, Agua Fria Food Bank and St. Mary’s Food Bank. The company also committed to providing weekly pallet deliveries of prepared meals to each organization.

Company officials said the vans allow food banks to transport fresh produce and prepared meals safely and efficiently, expanding distribution capacity in a region where hunger remains a persistent issue. In Arizona, roughly one in seven people struggles with food insecurity, according to company representatives.

Factor’s Goodyear facility, which opened in 2023, donates surplus meals before expiration

and has expanded efforts to include prepared food, redirecting items that might otherwise go to waste.

“It’s really about supporting our local families, reducing food, waste, and helping in our community,” said Josh Moody, a Factor representative.

Youth leadership on the rise

Blair, an 11th-grade student at Estrella Foothills High School, was recognized for her leadership in the school’s Interact Club, a service organization that coordinates volunteer projects and charitable drives.

Under her leadership, the club increased its annual canned food drive from about 400 items last year to more than 600 this year.

She also volunteers at community events and local charities while balancing a rigorous academic schedule.

“I feel that it’s very important that we’re giving back and spreading kindness,” Blair said. “Just knowing that I am making a little impact ... definitely motivates me to keep going.”

School officials described her as committed and consistent, noting that youth engagement in service projects plays a key role in building long-term civic involvement.

As Goodyear continues to grow, leaders say the collaboration between residents, nonprofits, schools and private businesses will be critical to ensuring that economic development is matched by community investment.

“I always like to do a shoutout to our residents because when we need them, they step up,” Mayor Joe Pizzillo said during the ceremony. “In 2025, we brought the community together... It’s important that people feel pride in their community.”

Visit goodyearaz.gov for more information.

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Independent Newsmedia hosts inaugural Senior Expo in Goodyear

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Seniors from across the West Valley gathered for the inaugural Litchfield Park and Goodyear Senior Expo hosted by Independent Newsmedia, connecting residents with health care providers, home improvement companies, entertainment venues and other community resources.

The event brought together more than 30 vendors serving Goodyear, Litchfield Park and surrounding communities. Attendees browsed booths, collected information and spoke one-on-one with representatives about services tailored to active adults.

For attendees Don and Claudia

• See **Expo** on page 26



More than 30 vendors connect West Valley seniors with health, home and entertainment resources at Tuscany Falls Clubhouse. (James Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)



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Sun City • May 4, 2026 • Sundial Rec Center

Fountain Hills • July 7, 2026 • Fountain Hills Community Center

Surprise • August 18, 2026 • The Colonnade

Sun City • September 23, 2026 • Sundial Recreation Center

Sun City West • October 28, 2026 • SCW Foundation Center

Mesa • November 13, 2026 • Mesa Marketplace Swap Meet

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Expo

• From page 25

McDonald of PebbleCreek, the expo offered both information and social connection.

"I wanted to see if there's anything new," Claudia McDonald said, adding that events like the Senior Expo make it easier for residents to find the information they need in one place. "We're glad for events like these, especially so close to home."

Among the exhibitors was Arizona Broadway Theatre, a nonprofit dinner theater based in Peoria. Megan Werner, guest services manager, said the expo offered an opportunity to connect directly with a core audience.

"A big part of our patrons are seniors," Werner said. "A lot of people go downtown for shows and don't realize we're right here in the West Valley."

Werner said face-to-face conversations help to introduce residents to the theater's lineup of musicals, tribute performances and murder mystery shows, as well as its dinner theater experience.

As a nonprofit, she said, community engagement is essential.

"Community is what keeps the arts alive," Werner said. "We rely on the community not just for donations, but for ticket sales and keeping theater alive in the West Valley."

Health care organizations also used the expo to emphasize prevention

and local access to services. Christie Shears a representatives from City of Hope said many seniors are unaware of local information about cancer screenings and early detection guidelines.

"One of the biggest messages is that we're here in Goodyear," Shears said. "We're a resource close to home."

Shears said conversations about cancer can be difficult but are critical, especially for older adults who face higher statistical risks.

"Early detection is key, so the conversations we have with people before they know more are key" she said.

"The sooner you can find out if you're at risk or in the early stages, the better the outcome can be."

Home improvement vendors also highlighted the value of in-person interaction. Wesley North, representing Jacuzzi Bath Remodel of Arizona, said expos allow potential customers to ask detailed questions and explore options that can't be covered in a brief advertisement.

"In person, you can interact and answer questions right away," North said. "It's a better way to reach people, especially in a retirement community."

Vendors represented industries ranging from Medicare insurance and clinical research to dermatology, dental care, travel and home remodeling.

Organizers said the goal of the Senior Expo is to strengthen ties between local businesses and the area's growing active-adult population.

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THINGS TO DO



Live wildlife comes to the Georgia T. Lord Library. (James Goldmeer/Independent News-media)

Arizona Wildlife Showcase

Tuesday, March. 24, 6:00-7:15 p.m.

Arizona Game and Fish educators introduce live wildlife ambassadors to explore adaptations and behaviors.

Georgia T. Lord Library, 1900 N Civic Sq, Goodyear, 85395

Star Party

Monday, March 23, 6:00-8:45 p.m.

West Valley Astronomy Club shares their telescopes and jazz for an evening event.

Goodyear Civic Square, 1900 N Civic Sq, Goodyear, 85395

Easter in the Square

Saturday, March 28, 9:00 a.m.-noon

Families join the Easter Bunny in an egg hunt, a petting zoo face painting and games on the lawn. Litchfield Square Park 279 N La Loma Ave. Litchfield Park, 85340

Theater in the Park

Saturday, March 28 5:00-8:00 p.m.

Local actors put on a free performance in GSQ.

Goodyear Civic Square, 1900 N Civic Sq, Goodyear, 85395

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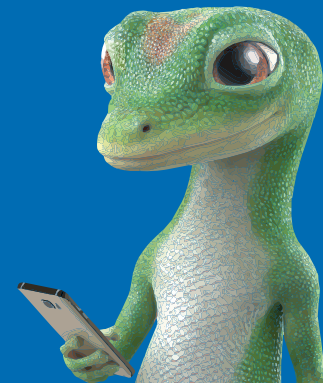
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FROM THE COVER

Coach

• From page 1

gram based in the West Valley.

For Hagemann, returning to the pool is more than a seasonal restart. It is another step in growing a sport she believes Arizona families have been missing.

Water polo is a team sport played with seven athletes per side, blending swimming, strategy and physical defense. Teams have 30 seconds to score on each possession during four eight-minute periods. Players tread water constantly, swim with their heads up and battle for position in a deep pool where they cannot touch the bottom.

"It's like a mix of swimming, basketball and a little bit of wrestling," Hagemann said. "You're constantly moving, constantly communicating. It's hard, but that's what makes it special."

She launched the club after years of commuting across the Valley to practice with other teams. What began as a small, independent effort quickly evolved when Avondale officials approached her about forming a city partnership. The collaboration made the program more affordable and accessible than traditional club sports, opening the door for beginners and experienced swimmers alike.

The results came quickly.

In October, Phoenix Water Polo sent the first all-girls team from Arizona to compete in a local tournament, along with a coed 12-and-under squad. The athletes faced established programs from California and Hawaii, many of whose players had been competing since early childhood.

Phoenix did not win a game, but for Hagemann, the scoreboard was not the point.

"They scored goals. They learned in real time," she said. "You could

see their confidence grow with every possession."

The club has expanded from three athletes in its earliest days to 24 by the fall season, drawing families from Avondale, Buckeye, Peoria and Glendale. Many are swimmers who had long wanted to try water polo but could not make the drive to East Valley programs.

Liam Mallaburn, one of the returning athletes, said he joined after his mother found the club.

"I really wanted to try something new, and I've always loved being in the water," he said. "I also have cousins who play water polo, so that made it sound even more fun and interesting to me."

His mother, Milica Mallaburn, said the sport has transformed her son's relationship with the pool.

"Instead of repetitive laps, he gets to move constantly, think strategically and play as part of a team. It keeps him engaged, motivated," she said. "What makes water polo especially amazing for kids who love the water is that they're immersed in an environment they already enjoy. It combines swimming, teamwork, hand-eye coordination and fast decision-making, all while being incredibly fun."

Hagemann beams when she talks about moments such as a beginner learning to tread water for the first time, a shy athlete scoring in tournament play or teammates cheering for one another from the deck.

She remembers one player who joined without strong swimming skills. By October, he was competing and scoring goals against veteran teams.

"Seeing that confidence change," she said, "that's everything."

Her long-term goal is to establish a city-based league across the Valley, giving local athletes regular competi-

• See **Water Polo** on page 29

Water Polo

• From page 28

tion without the expense of traveling out of state. With new aquatic facilities opening in the West Valley, she believes the timing is right.

In the meantime, she keeps her message simple for families considering the sport.

"Don't be afraid," Hagemann said. "Everyone starts somewhere. If you love the water, or even if you're just curious, come try it."

Liam Mallaburn agrees.

"Don't be afraid to try something new. Water polo is super fun, you learn a lot and the coaches are awesome," he said. "It's a great sport and a really cool experience."

For Hagemann, the sport that shaped her childhood is no longer something she has to drive more than an hour to find. It is growing in her own community, one practice, one goal and one new player



Phoenix Water Polo Club founder Mariah Hagemann expands access to the sport in Avondale, Goodyear and beyond. (Submitted photo/City of Avondale)

at a time.

The club will relaunch its spring season at the Avondale Aquatic

Center, 11275 W. Civic Center Drive. Practices run from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays

through May 23.

More information is available at phoenixwaterpoloclub.com.



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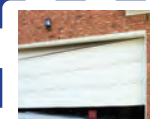
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