



Community

Why water bills may go up for some Glendale residents; **2**



INDEPENDENT

Sports

Seniors get Cactus softball back above .500; **18**



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EDUCATION

DVUSD superintendent announces resignation

Finch hoping to stay on through June 2027

By Steve Stockmar
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Deer Valley Unified School District is looking for solutions to its enrollment issues, and now the district is looking for a new superintendent.

Dr. Curtis Finch, who has led Arizona's fifth largest school district since 2017, tendered his resignation in a letter to Board President Paul Carver dated March 11. The letter states his resignation will take effect June 30, 2027.



Dr. Curtis Finch

"When I first arrived in 2017, I know the board was concerned about stability at the district so they asked me to stay more than the previous superintendent," Finch wrote

• See **Finch** on page 4

NEIGHBORS

One Step Beyond takes major step to new community in Glendale

Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

For more than 20 years, One Step Beyond Inc., has provided empowering programs and services for adults with intellectual disabilities — but there was always the aim for more.

Housing services were included in One Step Beyond's original contract in 2002, said Jeff Swanson, the executive director of administration for OSBI. Early attempts were insufficient.

"We've had group homes in the past, and we've quickly recognized that's not the model we're looking for. We're looking for an independent living arrangement, ideally," Swanson said.

By 2018 and 2019, more people connected to One Step Beyond were asking about a community. Parents want safe, long-term affordability and not a lease-based living setup, he said.

In the next two years, One Step Beyond plans to build a condomini-



A participant in One Step Beyond Inc's adult day programs in Glendale makes figures with clay on March 13. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

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COMMUNITY NEWS

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Council debates spending on Heroes, Sahuaró Ranch parks

When Glendale leaders have their next talks about the city's bond proposal, expect further animated discussions among council members about what money will be planned for what parks.

The most recent debate began during the March 3 budget workshop, and focused on bond funding for the Heroes Park recreation and aquatic center or the redevelopment of Sahuaró Ranch Park.

Read online: <https://tinyurl.com/ftfhuv2y>

Glendale to revisit shooting range proposal

The next time the Glendale City Council will discuss the Capital Improvement Plan is during its April 13 workshop the debate over an indoor shooting range accessible to Glendale Police officers should resume.

Eventually, council members reached a detente during a March 3 budget workshop. They agreed to have staff present cost figures and funding sources for the project and hear from Police Chief Colby Brandt.

Read online: <https://tinyurl.com/34htzyzf>

Kellis senior class finishes 3-year journey as 5A champs

On March 6, the connected community of Raymond S. Kellis High gathered at Veteran's Memorial Coliseum to cheer on an even more tight knit group, its girls basketball team.

Read online: <https://tinyurl.com/3xj49hrs>

UTILITIES

Why water bills may go up for some Glendale residents

City nearing start of water meter upgrades

By Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Glendale plans to replace all of its residential and commercial customers' water meters with advanced metering infrastructure, and a pilot program for the ultrasonic meters is on track to begin later this year.

Three related contracts will be there for the Glendale City Council to vote on during its March 24 meeting.

For homes and businesses with older meters that do not accurately track all of the water used, bills are likely to increase between 3 and 6%.

During a March 10 council workshop Ron Serio, Glendale's water services director, said 94% of the meters are read by city employees going to the home or business.

Current meters will be replaced with ultrasonic meters.

"The current meters we have are mechanical and as they get older, they wear and slow down. They don't capture all the water that has gone through the meters," Serio said. "So if you have an old meter, you're not paying for the full amount of water you're receiving. These meters don't have moving parts in them so they're supposed to stay accurate through the life of the meter, which we expect to be 18-20 years."

On March 24, the council will vote on a \$29 million, three-year contract with Badger Meter for the purchase and installation of meters and lids.

A second contract with Badger, for just more than \$10 million over a



Ron Serio is Glendale's Water Services department director. (City of Glendale)

20-year basis, focuses on Beacon Software as a service. This takes data into cloud software.

An Arcadis contract worth nearly \$1.5 million is for the next three years of quality insurance.

"One of the issues residents need to understand is that this is literally measuring every single gallon of water that you're using," Councilmember Lauren Tolmachoff said on March 10. "You're getting billed for the exact amount of water you're using, which can be a surprise to some customers."

On the flip side, modernizing the meter infrastructure can save users money with leak detection much sooner.

The more immediate nature of the new system's available data will help the process. Customers can access daily and even hourly water usage.

"One is early leak detection. That is a really important item. Right now,

we don't read meters but once a month and it takes two or three weeks to get that data into the system and a bill is mailed out," Serio said. "There will be daily information and a customer portal. So customers will know if they have a leak right away. This is really important for water conservation, especially with the drought we've been in for a long time."

If the council approves the contracts, Glendale will begin a three-year changeover to the ultrasonic meters with an 8-12 month pilot program, which would kick off around June or July.

The pilot program would include about 3,500 chosen accounts, with a mix of residential and commercial properties. The mayor, council and city employees are encouraged to volunteer for the pilot program.

"We want all of our customer classes

• See **Water** on page 7

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FROM THE COVER

Finch

- From page 1

in his letter. “At that negotiation, I made a promise to serve this district for 10 years if they would have me. As a man of honor, my commitment to that promise remains an option. Whether a majority of the board prefers I complete that full decade or accelerate the transition, my only priority is doing what serves the best interest of DVUSD.”

The board has not taken action since Finch’s resignation as of press time.

Finch’s surprising announcement came in the closing moments of the governing board’s March 11 meeting.

At the end of a second straight governing board meeting largely devoted to options recommended by the district’s long-range planning committee to manage an expected enrollment surge, Finch announced he would resign his position shortly after the board didn’t support a recommendation to modify attendance boundaries at impacted campuses.

During time allotted to his superintendent report per board meeting protocol, Finch used his time to offer one brief sentence.

“I will be submitting my resignation tomorrow to HR including an effective date. That’s it, thank you,” Finch said.

Seconds later the meeting adjourned.

The move came on a night where discussions about potential boundary changes at schools in north Peoria and north Phoenix got testy at times.

Board member Kim Fisher at one point claimed the long-range planning committee was “stacked.”

“To be honest, I believe the committee is stacked. It’s been stacked,” Fisher said from the dais. “It’s the same committee that does everything.”

Finch took umbrage with that suggestion.

“To say that the committee is

stacked or all committees in Deer Valley are stacked is a slap at my integrity and my character and the committee’s character and integrity,” Finch replied. “So I don’t appreciate that.”

Later in the meeting Finch emphasized the boundary change process, which dates back seven years, comes down to trusting the district’s superintendent office.

“Either we trust our superintendent or we don’t. It’s really what it’s boiled down to,” said Finch, before some audience members responded out loud that they did not trust him. “We have a process, and our committee has spent hundreds of hours working on that and that’s what happened the last time.”

Finch again emphasized trust is needed in the process of creating new school boundaries to accommodate new housing — and population — coming to Deer Valley Unified’s footprint that forecasters say will represent a community larger than Anthem.

“Everyone knows we have a problem, and your superintendent is recommending that we follow the committee’s recommendation,” Finch said. “It has come to this point now this is becoming a problem. It’s a problem today, it’ll be a problem tomorrow. So from my chair it’s we either trust the superintendent in the process or we don’t.”

The Arizona Department of Education recently recognized Deer Valley Unified as an A-rated district with 27 A-rated schools. Also, 93% of DVUSD schools earned A or B- ratings, demonstrating a high level of student achievement and school performance.

“It has been a privilege to lead this team as we climbed to the top of Arizona’s educational mountain for the last nine years,” Finch wrote in his resignation letter. “Our success belongs to the students, staff, administrators, parents, and community members who have supported my tenure, and I am deeply grateful for their partnership.



DOG PARK



COURTYARD LOOKING NORTH



COURTYARD LOOKING SOUTH

Renderings show several views from the interior courtyard of the planned Nikki’s Next Step condo project for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Glendale. (Courtesy One Step Beyond)

OSB

- From page 1

um community for adults with intellectual disabilities in Northern Glendale, north of Paradise Lane and east of 67th Avenue.

Named Nikki’s Next Step, the 57-unit, \$24 million community will have most of its properties for sale with a few units for lease.

“When One Step Beyond started, there was a young employee by the name of Nikki (Beaudoin)

who was a terrific gal. I think she was 20 when she came on board. All of a sudden, she ended up with some terrible symptoms and she got cancer. The cancer ate her up very quickly and she passed. It really left a hole in the organization at the early stages,” three-year OSBI board member James Tonkin said. “Her memory lives on, and we have posthumously named Nikki’s Next Steps after her.”

- See **Nikki’s** on page 20

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BUSINESS MOVES

NOW OPEN

1 Perfumania brings an expanded selection of affordable designer fragrances, gifts and accessories to Arrowhead Towne Center. The store opened March 20. Shoppers can find the new store on the upper level across from H&M.

2 LivAway Suites, a fast growing extended stay hotel brand, announced the opening of its newest property in Glendale on March 17. LivAway Suites - Glendale is west of 99th Avenue and Loop 101, halfway between Northern and Glendale avenues. This hotel is intentionally designed from the ground up for business travelers, project-based workers, relocating families and individuals seeking fully furnished, extended stay solutions.

3 Amped Fitness officially opened Feb. 23 in the Glendale Galleria, 5810 W. Peoria Ave. This new gym offers 24/7 access, a specialized “Babe Cave” for women only, cold plunges, saunas and strength and cardio equipment.

4 Hoho Smile boba tea, matcha and smoothie shop opened earlier this year inside the Bull King Steak House at 5795 W. Bell Road, Suite 3.

OPENING SOON

5 A new Whole Foods Market is planned at the former Big Lots in Glendale, near Arrowhead Towne Center, 17510 N. 75th Ave. The project was approved by the city of Glendale through a design review process and will change the existing building, with several exterior improvements and upgrades for the store.



6 Mission BBQ is bringing a location to 7350 W. Bell Road, Suite 102. There are two other West Valley locations in Surprise and Goodyear. The business recently submitted and received city of Glendale approval to modify the site plan to include a 520 square foot covered outdoor patio.

7 Swig and Nautical Bowls are expected to open this spring at 5917 N. 91st Ave. Both restaurants received their business license in February and is part of The Shops at the Cardinal development by Diversified Partners at the southeast corner of



LIVAWAY SUITES

Water

• From page 2

represented. We also want every part of the city represented,” Serio said.

Years two and three will be the city-wide implementation of the new program. Glendale has a tiered rate system based on amount of water used.

Assistant City Manager Vicki Rios said the pilot program will show the impacts of meter changes.

“Citywide, we’re losing 5-6% perhaps,” Councilmember Bart Turner said. “Their old meter wasn’t accurate. Their new one is and there could be a bit of sticker shock.”

About 6% of the meters served by the city are drive-by read meters mostly in close proximity to arterial roads.

The new user portal can automatically inform a resident of a leak. Glendale will investigate a home or business for a leak when fees spike.

Councilmember Lupe Conchas asked what happens if the pilot is not

successful.

“We will not purchase all the meters at once. We will purchase the 3,500 meters for the pilot program. Once we’ve done a proof of concept for that, then we’ll start purchasing meters as they’re ready to be installed,” Rios said.

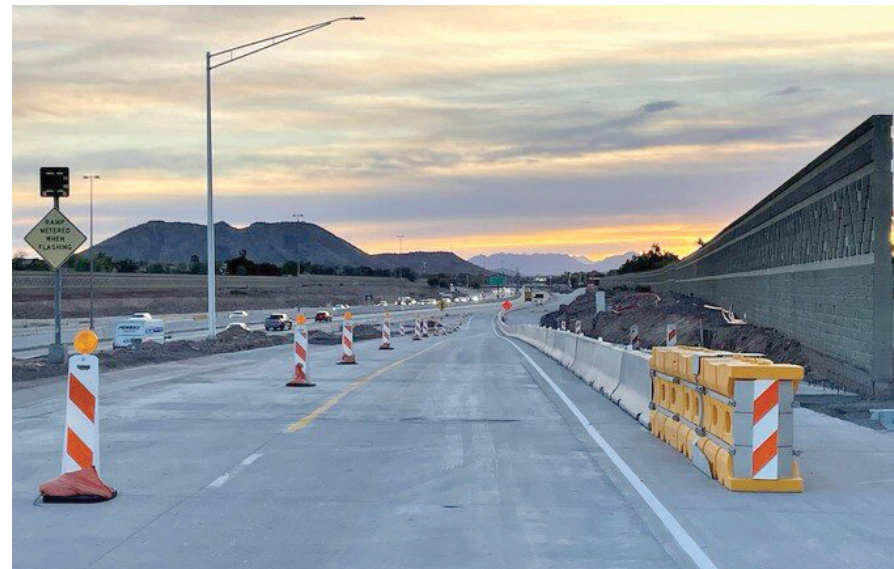
Mayor Jerry Weiers asked new City Manager Patrick Banger about the water bill spikes in Gilbert — where he was the city manager through 2025.

Gilbert’s water rate increase of 50% in April 2024 was followed by another 25% increase in April 2025.

Another 25% increase in Gilbert’s water rates is planned for April.

“There was a number of issues in Gilbert, occurring around the same time. Some substantial capital projects that were underway put pressure on rates and rate increase that have been planned for,” Banger said. “Then, in the middle of all that, the town of Gilbert had been in a conversion over to AMI for about the last five years and had close to 60,000 installed.”

TRANSPORTATION



RAMP CLOSURES CHANGE ALONG LOOP 101

The on-ramp eastbound onto Loop 101 from 75th Avenue is open again after work done as part of the free widening between 75th and Interstate 17. The westbound off-ramp at 75th began a 60-day closure starting March 9. The on-ramp at 67th Avenue eastbound is closed for 60 days beginning March 16. And the off-ramp at 59th Avenue eastbound closed for 60 days beginning March 23. (Arizona Department of Transportation)

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BUSINESS

Planners OK permit for self defense, firearms training in Citadelle Plaza

By Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

On Feb. 26, the Glendale Planning Commission unanimously approved a conditional use permit for a self defense-oriented business in a vacant space at Citadelle Plaza.

Rogelio Arrieta with Phalanx Tactical Group LLC is the applicant for the storefront, which is about 4,700 square feet. It falls under the health and fitness center designation, and includes firearms training, but will not involve live ammunition.

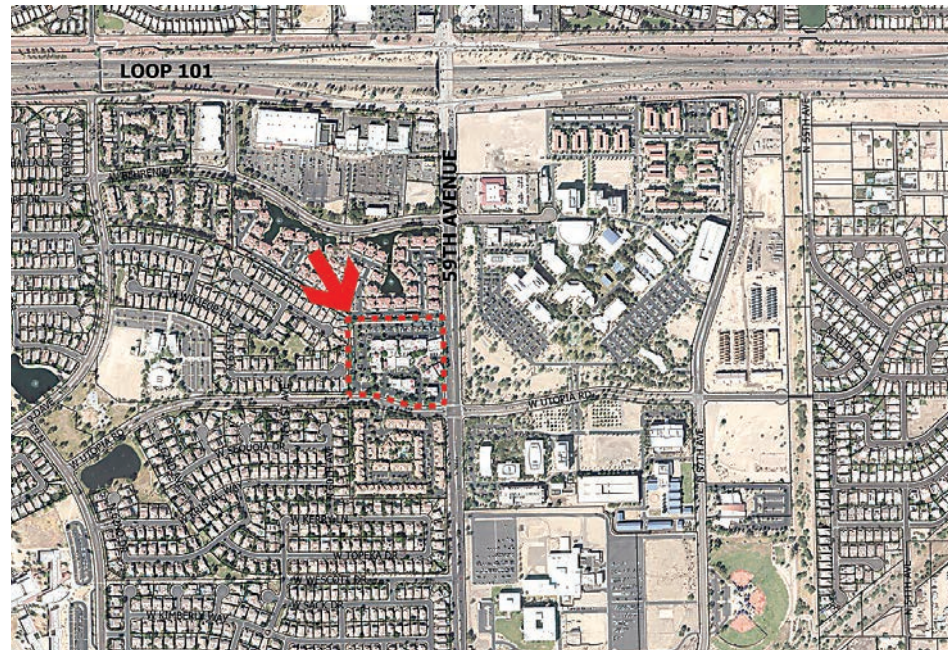
“The new self defense indoor training facility will offer a variety of training programs associated with firearms safety instructions in a class setting and self defense training,” Glendale Senior Plan-

ner Alex Lerma said at the meeting. “No live ammunition will be used or permitted in the facility. Only laser based or CO2-powered simulated firearms will be used on site.”

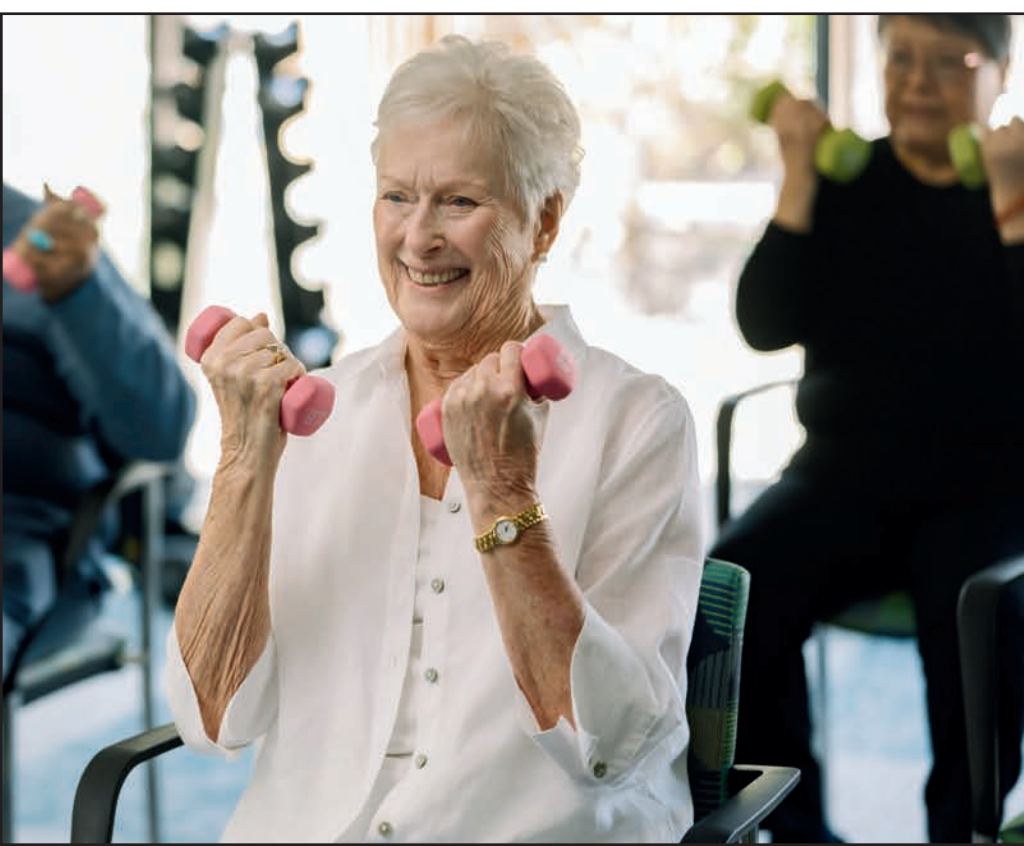
This training studio will be at 19420 N. 59th Ave. Up to nine staff members on site at one time. Each class will be limited to five students, with three classes running simultaneously.

Public concerns on this proposal — during a Dec. 10 virtual meeting — were related to the noise that might come from this use, Lerma said.

Deputy City Attorney James Gruber said that, as a conditional use permit, this business proposal does not need to go to the City Council for a vote.



An aerial map of Glendale, with Citadelle Plaza highlighted. (City of Glendale)



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THINGS TO DO



Billy's Place will host its 13th annual Hike for Hope on Saturday, April 11 at the sunrise Mountain trails in Peoria. (Courtesy Billy's Place)

Billy's Place leads 13th annual Hike for Hope in Peoria

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Billy's Place, a Peoria-based non-profit serving kids and families experiencing grief, will host its 13th annual Hike for Hope on Saturday, April 11, and is inviting both community mem-

bers and local businesses to take part as hikers and sponsors.

Billy's Place moved down the street from North Glendale to North Peoria earlier this year.

• See **Hope** on page 17

Come join Arizona Business Alliance & 406 Rodeo at Dillon's Western Trails Ranch to support your local businesses and have some great family fun. First come first serve Easter Basket.

Easter!

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OPINIONS

LETTERS TO THE NEWSROOM

**Please send your comments to
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**We are committed to publishing a wide
variety of reader opinions, as long as
they meet our Civility Guidelines.**

As our population ages, we must ensure seniors can remain in their homes with access to affordable health care, transportation and community support. Glendale's seniors deserve a plan that allows them to live with dignity in the city they helped build.

Lupe Conchas
GLENDALE

Editor's note: Lupe Conchas is the Glendale City Councilmember in the Cactus District.

Arizona Gives Day returns in April with new tools for nonprofits, donors

Arizona ranks near the bottom nationwide when it comes to charitable giving, according to recent national studies — a troubling distinction at a time when demand for nonprofit services across the state continues to rise.

But Arizona Gives Day, returning April 7, offers Arizonans a clear opportunity to reverse that trend and demonstrate a stronger culture of generosity statewide.

Powered by AZ Impact for Good, Arizona Gives Day is anchored this year by a significantly enhanced AZGives.org platform that supports nonprofits not just on a single day, but year-round.

Recent research highlighted by local and national media shows

♦ See **Letters** on page 11

Seniors deserve health care they can count on

Glendale is a place where people put down roots. Many of our seniors worked hard for decades, raised families here and chose to retire in the West Valley because it feels like a community they can rely on.

As a member of the Glendale City Council, I hear the same message again and again at Coffee with a Councilman events, town halls, and community gatherings: seniors want to stay in Glendale and age in place, close to their doctors, families and the neighborhoods they helped build.



Lupe Conchas

To make that possible, Glendale needs a clear and intentional strategy to support seniors as they age. Too often, older adults are forced to leave the city for care elsewhere, not because they want to, but because the right support systems are not in place. We can do better.

Small but meaningful investments make a difference. At Cascalote Apartments, I helped advocate for a new bus stop so residents could more easily reach doctor's appointments, pick up prescriptions, buy groceries, and stay connected to the community. For seniors on fixed incomes, reliable transportation is essential to maintaining independence.

Health care is also critical. Many seniors rely on Medicare Advantage, which often includes prescription coverage, vision, dental, hearing benefits, and transportation assistance. These services help seniors stay healthy and independent longer.

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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.

Your Opinion

Our opinions page is to provide an open forum for our readers. We hope to stimulate debate, not to dominate or control it. We reserve the right to edit our opinions, and we insist on civility. Please include your name and phone number, so we can contact you for clarification or confirmation. We welcome your photo. All opinions must be no more than 300 words.

Those that are judged as personal attacks or complaints about neighbors, businesses or other opinion writers will not be considered. No person may submit more than two opinions for publication during a calendar month.

Two submissions in the same issue will not be published. The content of a submission is the responsibility of the person who submitted it.

Speak Up

We support the use of pen names. Too many people don't speak up because they fear intimidation or even danger to their families and/or careers. Pen names are an important part of our nation's history.

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.

Speak Up

Read what local residents are saying about hot-button issues.

Below is a list of comments from people on Nextdoor who are speaking up on a number of topics from school closures to Deer Valley schools leadership.

Deer Valley Unified superintendent announces resignation after heated boundary meeting

It's the board that's the problem. They stop him at every turn. Schools are getting overcrowded. And they are hiring horrible teachers. Let's focus on that! Too many students are leaving for the ESA Scholarship. I've seen inside the classrooms. Our school went down from an A to a B because the teachers can't teach because of the board. They won't tell you but as a parent I will. He isn't the problem — **Sarah N.**

He needs to resign ASAP and DVUSD deserves a superintendent that is honest and transparent. — **Bibi Harrington**

PUSD board approves closure of 2 schools

Sad situation. I get why they had to do it but I don't agree with turning Cactus High School into a 7th-12th grade. I think that could be a mistake to the older students in the long run. — **GL Stanford**

Letters

• From page 10

Arizona lagging behind most states in charitable giving, even as non-profits face increased pressure from inflation, housing instability, food insecurity and reductions in public assistance programs. The gap between community needs and available resources continues to widen — and philanthropy plays a critical role in closing it.

The upgraded platform makes it easier than ever for nonprofits to raise funds and connect with supporters. Features include peer-to-peer fundraising tools, campaign management, and mobile-friendly donation pages that can be embedded directly into an organization's website. For many nonprofits, the platform serves as a robust primary donation portal without the cost or complexity of building one independently.

For donors, AZGives.org offers new tools to discover causes and organizations aligned with their values. A "Browse" feature allows users to search nonprofits by mission, county, population served and tax-credit eligibility — including Arizona Charitable, Foster Care and Public School Tax Credits. A new "Opportunities" section highlights volunteer roles and events, making it easier to engage beyond financial giving.

Donors can give now via the

website or during the early giving window opening March 17. Contributions are tax-deductible and may qualify for Arizona tax credits.

Businesses can participate through sponsorships, group giving and partnership opportunities. For more information, email azgives@azim-pactforgood.org.

Submitted by AZ Impact for Change

Editor's note: AZ Impact for Good is a statewide resource and advocate for Arizona's nonprofit and philanthropy communities. This opinion has been edited for length and can be read in full online at <https://tinyurl.com/jemx-pmbf>.

ESA voucher reform up to Arizona voters, again

Arizona voters are pretty smart. Strip away partisan packaging and leave dogma and dog whistles at the door, and Arizona voters are direct and to the point.

When asked twice about the universal expansion of school vouchers, they rejected it.

Unwilling to listen to voters, former Gov. Ducey and the Republican culture warriors expanded the program anyway. And now we see roughly \$1 billion being stripped from the state coffers.

These facts have been widely reported:

- ♦ 70% of the benefits of the program go to families who already sent their children to private religious schools or to children who were homeschooled.

- ♦ Oversight is an afterthought — diamond rings? Sure. Vacations to Sea World? Sure. Grand piano? No problem.

- ♦ It is the only program in the state budget that has no cap. The program has grown from less than \$200 million to \$1 billion in three years.

Now, voters will be asked for a third time to weigh in on the school voucher program. They are being asked by



Deborah Howard

Arizona public school advocates to rein in the worst abuses and erect some guardrails. I support this initiative 100%. I will help collect signatures to qualify it for the ballot.

I will speak of it at every event from now until election day.

And I will add that voters are having to do this work because the Republican-led State Legislature refused to do so. They had time to advance restrictions on voting, prioritize tax cuts for billionaires, and propose anti-LGBTQ+ measures attacking the most vulnerable.

So now it is up to voters. Again. To qualify the initiative. And to pass it in November. But passing the initiative, by itself, will be insufficient. Voters must also replace every Republican who refused to do their job with legislators who will tackle the real problems

that impact daily life.

This November, vote for ESA reform and the Democrats who will protect and fund quality public education that is supported by the vast majority of Arizona families.

Deborah Howard
GLENDALE

Editor's note: The author served as a special assistant in the U.S. Department of Labor under President Reagan and is a Democratic candidate for District 27, Arizona House of Representatives.

More Speak Up

I took my grandson out of Pioneer and put him in Washington School District for the rest of his 7th grade. I really do not think it's a good idea of having 7th graders in a high school. I really did like Pioneer, a lot of the teachers were very good with my grandson at Pioneer, but I really do not think putting young seventh graders in a high school area is good. So now he will move with the kids where he is at and go to the same high school as ninth graders. Where is all our taxes going to? Also the lottery money that supposed to go towards schools. — Julie Cohen


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PLANNING

Deer Valley Unified won't change campus boundaries

No changes appear imminent for 2026-27 school year, but discussions on managing expected enrollment spike will continue

By Steve Stockmar
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Deer Valley Unified School District's campus boundaries won't change in the near future.

Facing a vote to accept recommendations from the district's long range planning committee to reboundary district zones on the north end of Peoria and Phoenix where substantial population growth is forecast in the coming years, the governing board didn't approve the motion at its March 10 meeting.

Board president Paul Carver and board member Steve Bottfeld voted in favor of the committee's recommendations, which would have impacted three high school regions based on current and projected enrollment capacity in time for the 2026-27 academic year. Board member Kim Fisher voted nay, and board members Dr. Karen Pack and Stephanie Simacek abstained, with Pack during her vote citing "not enough information."

The meeting was well attended by parents of students from Union Park School which, along with Norterra Canyon and Sonoran Foothills, would have been impacted by new boundaries in nearby



Deputy Superintendent Heather Mock, at left, leads the presentation March 10 about possible boundary changes in the northern part of the district as a crowded audience listens at the district office. (Independent Newsmedia/Steve Stockmar)



Brian Elam was one of a handful of parents of Union Park School students to speak out against recommendations to change school boundaries during the March 10 public comments portion of the meeting. (Independent Newsmedia/Steve Stockmar)

neighborhoods. Sonoran Foothills and Union Park are currently over 90% capacity, projected to reach nearly 200% and 161%, respectively, by 2035.

Brian Elam, one of a handful of parents of Union Park students who spoke out against the committee recommendations during the public

MEETINGS THIS MONTH

What: DVUSD governing board meetings

When: 7 p.m. April 7 & 28

Where: DVUSD Governing Board Room, 20402 N. 15th Ave., Phoenix or streamed at youtube.com/@dvusdboard/streams

comments portion of the meeting, reflected afterward on the motion failing to pass.

"It feels good," he said, before turning his focus to the November 2025 General Election in which voters approved a budget override for Deer Valley Unified by a 52-48% margin. "I campaigned for the override. A lot of these parents did as well. And we were told that if you pass this this will bring stability to the community, stability for your kids, all these things. So we did it, and this felt like a betrayal."

The long range planning committee will still meet to continue discussions about potential plans

to modify school boundaries in the future with growth in the northern part of the district expected to boom over the next few years, which will impact Arizona's fifth largest school district.

"We're not done," Carver said. "This will continue."

Throughout this process both sides — those in favor of the committee's recommendations and those who not in favor — agree that the upcoming population growth will impact the district's enrollment at campuses in that area.

"Everybody in there agrees we need to make a change but this was not the change," Elam said.

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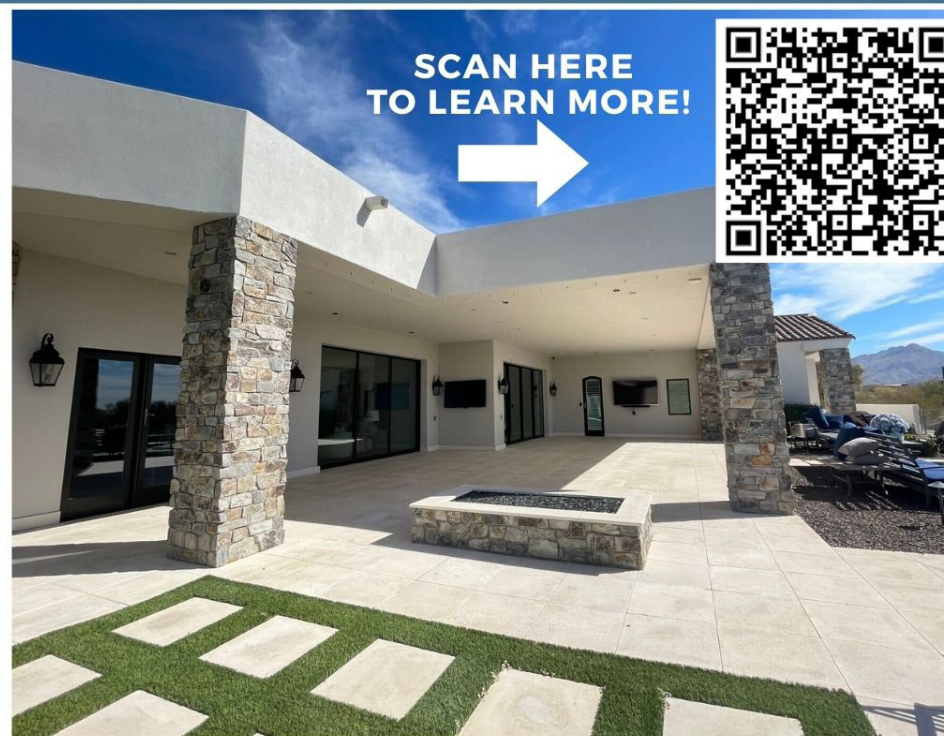
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PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Peoria Unified governing board approves closure of 2 schools

By Philip Haldiman
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Peoria Unified School District governing board approved the closures of Pioneer and Kachina elementary schools at their March 12 public meeting, an 8-hour affair that went late into the night.

K-6 Pioneer students will feed into Foothills Elementary School and K-6 Kachina students will feed into Canyon Elementary School.

Cactus High School will become a 7-12th grade configuration to include incoming 7th and 8th graders from Canyon, Foothills, Pioneer and Kachina elementary schools.

The governing board also approved the designation of the Cactus High School 7-12 program as a voluntary choice option for Oakwood Elementary School 7th and 8th grade stu-



The Peoria Unified School District governing board voted to close Kachina Elementary School (pictured here) and Pioneer Elementary School, both in Glendale after the 2025-26 school year ends. (Independent Newsmedia/Philip Haldiman)

dents, with Oakwood remaining a K-8 campus.

The changes will begin for the 2026-27 school year.

Lastly, going a different direction than prescribed in the agenda, the board voted to table the discontinuation of the district's eCampus to

K-8th grades.

All votes were unanimous.

The different direction was sparked when governing boardmember Janelle Bowles invited a last-minute presentation about the eCampus that led boardmembers to table its discontinuation. Some board members felt the

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eCampus could be viable if it was given more of a chance.

When it came to voting on the item, governing boardmember Becky

• See **Closures** on page 15



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Closures

• From page 14

Proudfit motioned to close the eCampus to K-8th grades, while keeping it open to 9-12th grade, as it was written in the agenda.

But Bowles said she didn't have enough information to shut down K-4, so Proudfit withdrew her motion and governing boardmember Jeff Tobey motioned to table the item, which carried.

Bowles said she didn't have a full enough picture to completely close the eCampus.

"I am very disheartened because I did not know that we have not advertised the eCampus. I don't know what the disconnect is, but we've got to get on that yesterday," Bowles said. "Can we slowly transition into building the eCampus instead of being in the red?"

The board will consider the eCampus item at a later board meeting,



The Peoria Unified School District Governing Board approved the closures of two elementary schools at their March 12 public meeting. (Independent Newsmedia/Philip Haldiman)

which was well received by many community members who came to speak in support of keeping it.

Overall, the board was supportive of the multiple changes and lauded Cactus High School Principal Kristi Hammer for her data-driven process in the high school becoming a 7-12 grade model. Proudfit said the level of opportunity for students with these changes is exciting.

"These kids are going to be so well

cared for. Not only are they going to have additional opportunities but they are going to become part of that existing culture that I think is unmatched," she said.

Board President Heather Rooks said she has taken the decision of closing schools very seriously.

"I know that you have built communities for the last 30 plus years at these schools. I know that it's disheartening to hear having that discussion of school

closures, and I just want to recognize that, and the impact that any decision that is made on school closures, it's going to be difficult," she said. "It's a hard decision. I have not slept great in the last week because I know that it's affecting kids and it's affecting people's lives."

The school closures have come about due to declining enrollment, increasingly under-utilized facilities, and rising costs, among other factors.

The months-long process of closing the schools has included opportunities for the public to give their input. District officials have said the process of informing the PUSD community on these changes will begin immediately.

Senior News Editor Philip Haldiman can be reached at phaldiman@iniusa.org, or on X @philiphaldiman. Please submit comments at yourvalley.net/letters or email them to AzOpinions@iniusa.org. We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our [Civility Guidelines](#).

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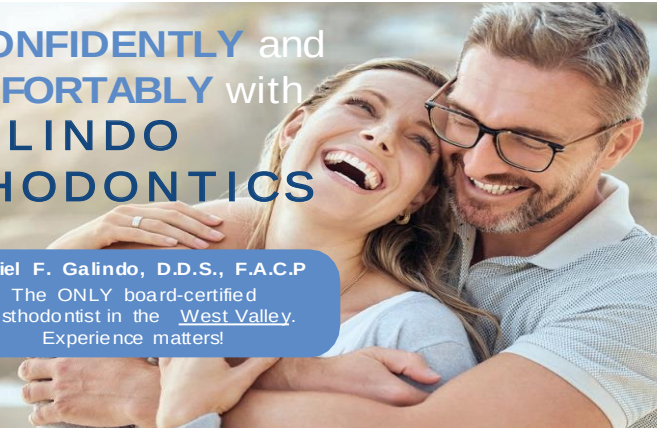
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From left: Zoe Coleman, Scott Harris, Roger Greaves, Kerry Schulman, Jennifer Toerpe, Nikki Hardin and Anthony DiBella stand for a ribbon cutting on the new Ronald McDonald House Family Room at Banner Children's at Thunderbird Medical Center in Glendale. (Courtesy Ronald McDonald House)

Ronald McDonald House family room opens in Banner Thunderbird

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Family members of up to 53 hospitalized children can benefit every day as Ronald McDonald House Central and Northern Arizona has opens the first Ronald McDonald House Family Room in the Valley at Banner Children's at Thunderbird Medical Center.

Designed as a place for families to find comfort and support as they stay close to their hospitalized child, the family room opened March 2 inside the medical center at 5555 W. Thunderbird Road in Glendale.

A majority of construction costs for the family room were offset by a \$200,000 contribution from Erika and Roger Greaves with Youth Angels.

The 710-square-foot Ronald McDonald Family Room will be reserved for families whose children are receiving care in the 36-bed Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and 17-bed Pedi-

atric Intensive Care Unit.

Just steps from intensive care facilities, the family room features a reception area, a lounge, a kitchenette with coffee and snacks, wi-fi, laundry amenities and a private lactation room. The space also includes two napping bays designed for rest and renewal with massage chairs, noise-canceling headphones and a calm environment for parents and caregivers to recharge.

"When a child is receiving critical care, proximity matters," Kerry Schulman, President and CEO of Ronald McDonald House Central and Northern Arizona stated in a press release. "This Ronald McDonald House Family Room is about providing families a place to pause, take a deep breath and decompress without ever having to leave the hospital."

The family room layout was designed by Interiors In Design, with architectural support from HKS and

• See **Care** on page 17

The recently opened Ronald McDonald House Family Room at Banner Thunderbird Medical Center in Glendale includes these napping pods. (Courtesy Ronald McDonald House)



Care

• From page 16

construction by Kitchell, at a total cost of \$375,000.

“Care at our hospital doesn’t just mean doctors and nurses helping patients get better — it also extends to family members and their well-being,” stated Anthony DiBella, interim chief executive officer of Banner Children’s at Thunderbird. “This Family Room will provide a welcome

source of rest and support for parents who are often exhausted while their children are in the hospital.”

The family room will initially be open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday with a long-term goal of expanding hours as volunteer shifts are filled. Volunteers are essential to operating the room.

Community members interested in volunteering can contact Jen Donnelly at jdonnelly@ronaldmcdonald-housecnaz.org.

Hope

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This year’s theme, “Making Space for Grief,” encourages participants to walk in memory of loved ones while helping ensure that grieving children and families have access to free, compassionate support.

The Hike for Hope is a family-friendly morning event featuring a hike, memorial signs honoring loved ones, kids’ activities, music, raffles, and the organization’s therapy dog, Moose, known for delivering high-quality hugs.

“Our hike brings together families, friends, schools, and businesses for one shared purpose, showing kids they are not alone in their grief,” said Kris Friedman, executive director of Billy’s Place. “It’s meaningful, it’s healing, and it’s a beautiful reminder of what a caring community can do.”

Local businesses are invited to participate as event sponsors, gaining visibility with hundreds of attendees while

IF YOU GO

What: Hike for Hope, Making Space for Grief

When: Saturday, April 11

Where: Copper Hills Church / Sunrise Mountain Trails

Who: Open to all ages and abilities

Registration: Community members can register as hikers, form teams, or walk in honor of a loved one.

demonstrating their commitment to kids’ mental health and community well-being. Sponsors receive recognition through event signs, marketing materials, and social media, and may also participate by forming employee teams or volunteering on event day.

Proceeds from the Hike for Hope directly support Billy’s Place programs, which are always offered at no cost to families.

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SPORTS

GIRLS SOFTBALL

Seniors restore Cactus softball to respectability

Richard Smith

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Charley Enos and Ciara Anthony came to Cactus High School as freshmen for their own reasons, and they did not know each other.

Four years later, it is hard for either of them to imagine trying to rebuild the Cobras without the other.

“We had softball so we were kind of forced to hang out with each other. And then we kind of realized that we saw the same things and were kind of the same person,” Enos said. “We’ve grown to like each other. I love her. Couldn’t do it without her.”

Anthony watched Cactus softball growing up nearby and attending Foothills Elementary School next door.

She said she wanted to bring that reputation and tradition back.

“She was my person that I could go to, just because we knew the same things and had the same goals,” Anthony said. “It’s a funny story. She was catching me in our freshman year, and she’s not a catcher. I think that brought us a lot closer.”

Enos arrived, in large part, because coaches at Cactus would not discourage her from playing three sports — volleyball, basketball and softball.

“It was about that, but also a lot of the programs were flexible with my club softball. That kind of made it easy and they were good people to be around,” Enos said.

Their freshman year was trying, as Hipolito Venegas was the Cobras’ third coach in three years. He left after that 11-17 season.

Anthony and Enos were most experienced softball players in the program from day one, other than sophomore Leilani Diaz, who transferred



Cactus softball seniors Charley Enos, top, and Ciara Anthony pose during a preseason photo shoot in the Glendale school's gym. Both are four-year varsity players who will continue their careers at community colleges in the Valley next year. (For Independent Newsmedia/Courtesy Ed Russell Photography)

to Centennial after that 2023 season.

“It was two underclassmen, pretty much, running the show. I think over the years we finally got more people we could trust and rely on,” Enos said.

Former University of Arizona player Alex Morgan arrived in 2023-24 to coach the Cobras and provide some stability.

Both bring something special to the table that creates a competitive and enjoyable environment, Morgan said.

“Their presence and desire to stay at Cactus helped me establish a core to build a team around. While they shared the same goal to grow the program and become competitive again, they each have their own way of do-

ing it. Ciara is quiet and consistent, and Charley is boisterous and engaging,” she said.

Enos said it is nice to have a coach that trusted players’ abilities, and saw their long-term potential.

The Cobras would be pushed again.

“Coach Alex is great. She demands a lot of us and she sets expectations high for us,” Anthony said.

Cactus is still nowhere near the program it was when Bartt Underwood coached the Cobras to three state finals between 2012 and 2021. But things are looking up.

Following an 8-14 season in 2024, Cactus improved to 12-10 last season and qualified for the 4A play-in.

It was the program’s first 4A postseason action since the 2021 quarterfinals. Players grew beyond their statistics.

“When I first got here I was really shy, I’d say, and didn’t like to step out of my comfort zone. I think being here four years and having coach Alex here, she’s really pushed me to speak up and stand up for myself.” Anthony said.

She and Enos got some help in 2025, from a somewhat expected source. Freshman catcher Rhyen Enos led the Cobras in steals and fielding percentage, while finishing second in batting average, on base percentage, runs and hits.

Her sister could move to third base and shortstop and had another friend to talk to.

“I’m so lucky to have a sister around my age that I can play with,” Enos said. “It’s really nice to see her get to grow as an athlete and young woman. It’s one of the best experi-

• See **Seniors** on page 19



Cactus senior Ciara Anthony sides into third base ahead of the tag during the Cobras' March 11 home game against Paradise Honors. (For Independent Newsmedia/Courtesy Ed Russell Photography)

Seniors

• From page 18

ences.”

The other main arrival in 2025, freshman pitcher Riley Kilgore, gives Anthony some relief in the circle after she pitched a team high 71 innings in 2024.

Kilgore also adds some pop to the lineup, finishing third on the team in RBI as a freshman and tied for third in RBI through the first 13 games of this season.

Morgan said each team since she arrived has followed the lead of Anthony and Enos because they know what it takes to be successful and they do not just preach, they do the work.

“I probably demand more from the two of them than anyone else and they take it in stride because they want to win and they seem to like the challenge,” Morgan said. “Ciara is the quiet leader. She models how to go through and challenge yourself at a practice and how to compete in a game. I think it is fair to say her team-

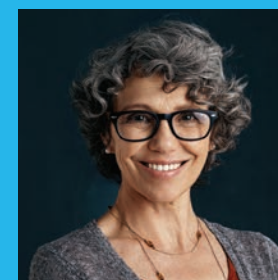
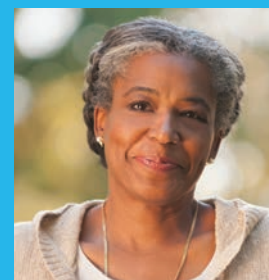
mates can always tell she is giving her best and they try to do the same. Charley is our goofy vocal leader. She’s not afraid to tell her teammates how we do things in our program and reiterate our standards, but she also tries to make sure everyone is having a good time.”

Charley Enos is committed to play at Glendale Community College and plans to study fire science. In March, she set the girls state record in the state high school fire science competition.

Enos said she wanted to be close to home, as does Anthony.

Anthony signed to play for legendary coach Heinz Mueller at Phoenix College next spring. She said she wants to study sports marketing eventually.

“He knows everybody and knows what he’s doing, obviously. Phoenix College has a winning culture. They’ve won like 11 national championships (actually 10),” Anthony said. “My goal is to go Division I after Phoenix College. I think Phoenix College is the place to be, honestly.”



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Nikki's

- From page 4

Tonkin is a Scottsdale resident and co-chair of the capital campaign for Nikki's Next Steps.

He also is a One Step Beyond parent.

"It was a godsend that we found the Scottsdale campus when we were looking for a place for Miles. It was very difficult to get in because they have a lot of capability and ability to expand there but staff is always an issue in this industry. They had a huge wait list," Tonkin said.

He admitted some of his motivations are selfish. Tonkin hopes Miles, now 26, will live at the complex.

More than that, Tonkin recognizes the need is great.

"I hope my son Miles, who's 26 now, will be able to move into a two-bedroom place and that will be his forever home. It would give my wife and I that opportunity to enjoy retirement, which we've been waiting to do for a long time," Tonkin said.

During its March 24 voting meeting, the Glendale City Council was set to decide whether to approve a zoning change on the 3.5 acres for Nikki's Next Steps from single residence to planned area development. Results of the meeting were not available at press time.

The Glendale Planning Commission recommended approval of the zoning change and a general plan amendment from medium-high-density residential to high-density residential during its Feb. 26 meeting.

"In order to make sure we're respecting the privacy of those single-family homes to the north of us, all the homes to the north of the PAD are restricted to one story in height, a maximum of 16 feet.

With two stories, there's the concern of looking out windows into back yards," said attorney Michael Maerowitz, an OSBI representative from Phoenix-based firm Snell & Wilmer.

CUTTING THE COST

Right now, the Valley has three residential communities designed for adults with intellectual disabilities. The highest profile is in North Glendale, Treasure House at 7815 W Aspera Blvd., founded by Brenda Warner and her NFL Hall of Fame husband, Kurt.

"It's gorgeous, but it's lease-based and country club style. None of our parents can afford it," Swanson said.

Luna Azul also is along the Loop 101 corridor west of Seventh Street in Phoenix.

Seattle-based developer Mark Roth came to the Valley and pitched the idea of Luna to OSBI families.

"Luna is one of the first ones that did the fee sample. It's mortgageable. You can buy it. It's beautiful and it's a pocket community, no driveways or garages. Very few of these individuals drive," Swanson said. "Those are between \$400,000 and \$500,000 a unit. Very expensive, and you're talking 1,200 square feet. The issue there is there's an HOA, so affordability goes out of the window."

First Place AZ apartments in downtown Phoenix was founded by Denise Reznik, mother of a son with autism, and co-founded Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center.

Swanson gave First Place AZ a glowing testimonial. But it is lease-based and a transitional residence community.

Tonkin said there are about 40,000 parents of special needs chil-

Cost

- From page 20

dren in the Valley. About 10,000 of them are 60 or older, including he and his wife.

“It totally changed my life and my wife’s life,” Tonkin said. “She stopped working. She was the caretaker for Miles. I was building companies around the globe, so I was on the road all the time. If it wasn’t for her, I don’t know where Miles would be today.”

While Miles found his place in Scottsdale, OSBI runs a vibrant day program in several offices west of Arrowhead Towne Center in Glendale, at 7200 W. Bell Road.

When land that has never been developed became available in 2024 about one block south and a block to the east, Glendale became the ideal site for the first Nikki’s

- See **Offices** on page 22



A music group discusses playing techniques in the music room One Step Beyond Inc's adult day programs in Glendale on March 13. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)



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Offices

• From page 21

Next Step community.

OSBI purchased the land for \$1.6 million. Now its value is up to near \$2.3 million.

Excavation and environmental work is completed and the land already has water and sewer hooked up, from the family who sold it and owned the property for nearly 100 years.

Tonkin brought Anna Sepic, who has a long history in Valley commercial real estate, on to the OSBI board. Sepic started a search for bare land in the Valley, and OSBI was in a bidding war with casita developer just to the east.

"We made a great deal. It was a very affordable piece of land. Anna did the deal and she did a phenomenal job," Tonkin said. "I believe that One Step Beyond played a part in the decision the family made. But also in

part, it was Anna."

THE FIRST OF THE NEXT

Starting April 16, Swanson will be the Peoria-based company's CEO, replacing Madison Blanton.

To make Nikki's Next Steps more affordable, One Step Beyond has set a goal to raise one-third the cost to build the community, or \$8 million.

"The idea is to sell these units to families. We're going to have a handful that are lease based that have an affordable monthly rent for those that can't afford to buy it. It's going to be long-term, safe, secure and affordable," Swanson said.

"We're going to operate home- and community based services out of it — things like respite, attendant care etc. — that families need anyway."

The goal is to open Nikki's Next Step in late 2027 or early 2028.

OSBI hired a local general contractor. Tonkin, the founder and president of Healthy Brand Builders,

brought in an architect friend.

Outdoor social activities and games are a central feature, as comfortable social interactions are one of the primary purposes of Nikki's Next Step.

One- and two-story condos will be available, as will a small kitchen, community center and computer lab.

Other potential amenities, like a small movie theater, cornhole tossing area and pickleball courts, will have more resident input and be added after it is built.

Nikki's Next Step will be set off by a seven-foot wall and staff will always be on site. A quarter-mile walking trail will be just inside the wall.

"This is a vulnerable part of our population. We want to make sure they're not being taken advantage of. And they're with their peers," Swanson said.

The community is just east of All-Thrive365 Glendale — until recently known as the Foundation of Senior

Living.

One Step Beyond leadership envisions it as a proof of concept for future Nikki's Next Step communities in the Valley and near other OSBI centers in Northern California.

"My opinion, and probably Jim's is that this will be the first one. But it will not be the only one we build because there's so much need for this in the community."

Renderings of the community are available as is a fly through video of Nikki's Next Step when it is built.

"It gets the hair on the back of your neck standing up. It's so exciting," Tonkin said.

Editor Richard Smith can be reached at rsmith@iniusa.org, or on X @ [RSmithYVW](https://twitter.com/RSmithYVW). Please submit comments at yourvalley.net/letters or email them to AzOpinions@inusua.org. We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our [Civility Guidelines](#).



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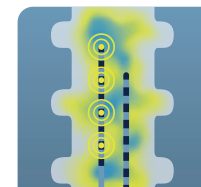
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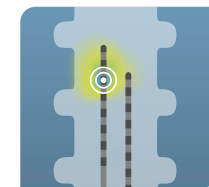
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Professional background highlights: I run a successful business in a different industry that has funded my mother's dream of owning a restaurant.

What I do: In the restaurant business, I quickly learned that it is essential to understand and learn every position within the establishment. This industry doesn't allow you to wait for the perfect hire. I handle everything from janitorial work to marketing, operations, and finances.

What I like most about doing business here: I love the people. I enjoy interacting with the community and hearing about my guests' days, or

when time permits, their life stories.

Previous occupation and why I left: I have done many things throughout my life, but I am currently in the transportation business and continue to help owner-operators thrive on the road.

What I am promoting: This seafood restaurant offers authentic dishes and recipes from Guaymas, and we have a plate for everyone, even those who prefer steak burritos.

What I'm excited about and why: Connecting with the community through one of the oldest and simplest forms of interaction ... gathering around food.

Favorite community cause and why: I am passionate about helping the homeless and those in need through Christ.

When and why I started my business/employment here: I took over in May 2024 to fulfill my mom's dream of owning a family restaurant.

My family: My mother and brothers work with me at the restaurant. I have a sister who is currently pregnant, and I will be a proud aunt. I'm from Texas.



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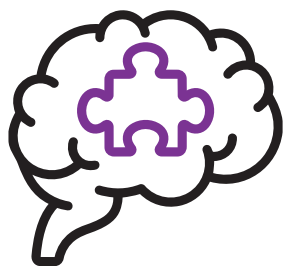
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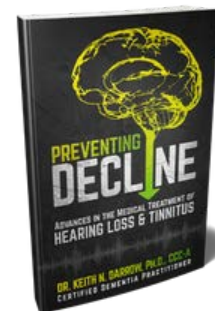
Program Director, Alzheimer's Association SW Chapter

For the past seven years, she has overseen care and support services for people living with dementia and their loved ones across Arizona. Kinsey received her M.A. in Psychology from Boston University and her M.S. in Social Work from Columbia University.



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