



Musical

Follow Dorothy down the rabbit hole; **14**



QUEEN CREEK

INDEPENDENT

Business

More tenants sign up for The Switchyard; **21**



April 2026

Volume 23 Issue 3

Your Nonpartisan Community Newspaper • YourValley.net

QCPD efforts to find missing teens may become state model

By Janet Perez

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

As concerns grow for teens who go missing from care in Queen Creek, town leaders are stepping up to provide information and action.

Since 2022, the Queen Creek Police Department has handled the cases of 1,063 missing children and teens. Of those, 764 have gone missing from group homes, the vast majority from Desert Canyon Academy and Desert Lily Academy. Eight are still missing.

"We've actually had amazing success when you look at over 1,000 kids and we only have eight outstanding right now. Not that those eight aren't important. They're terribly important, and we're working hard on it. But when you look at the numbers, that's an impressive track record," Queen Creek Police Chief Randy Brice said in an interview. "Now, that doesn't mean we rest on our laurels. I want this to continue to be better. That's why we're making all these efforts to do that."

The fear is that many of the teens in the larger group homes are traumatized, and if they leave, they risk more trauma

• See **Police** on page 31

CANINE CAPERS

Queen Creek's latest recreation space is for the dogs

By Janet Perez

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The town's big 2021 push to create or expand more public recreation spaces continues to benefit residents with the opening of Queen Creek's new dog park.

"The amenities of Queen Creek are one way the town delivers a high quality of life for families," Vice Mayor Bryan McClure said. "We had an amazing turnout of residents and their pets to this much anticipated grand opening. Everyone exuded excitement for the park's beauty and functionality."

The Founders' Park Dog Park, 22407 S. Ellsworth Road, officially opened on March 21.

• See **Park** on page 29



Dogs become fast friends at the opening of the new Founders' Park Dog Park grand opening on March 21. (Town of Queen Creek)



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A Queen Creek Police officer provides an update on an officer-involved shooting on Feb. 10. (QCPD Facebook page)

Authorities identify armed man killed by QC officers

Authorities have identified the man shot and killed by Queen Creek police officers on Tuesday as 23-year-old Gaven Johnson.

Mesa Police report the investigation into the shooting showed Johnson “was in possession of a handgun” at the time he fired a round at Queen Creek Police officers, striking two of them.

Read at: tinyurl.com/yw6u34ns

Police release update on officer-involved shooting

Authorities have released more details about a fatal shooting involving three Queen Creek Police Department officers and a Queen Creek resident in October.

Queen Creek Police, along with the East Valley Critical Incident Response Team, has released 911 audio, police body camera footage and drone footage of the Oct. 8 shooting in the 20400 block of Chandler Heights Road outside of a church and near an elementary school.

Read at: tinyurl.com/ydt67s38

WATER

Council approves spending \$19M to start building infrastructure for transporting Harquahala water

By Janet Perez
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

With the first payment made for Queen Creek’s Harquahala water purchase, the town is now turning to the infrastructure needed to get the water into the town.

The Queen Creek Town Council recently voted to shift more than \$19 million to pay for new water resource infrastructure, including service contracts.

“This \$19.3 million was not included in the (fiscal year 2025-26) adopted budget. As a result, budget adjustments are necessary to create the necessary spending authority by eliminating and deferring road and other water projects included in the current budget,” according to a staff report.

The fund transfer was on the council’s consent agenda in which all items are dealt with through one motion and vote.

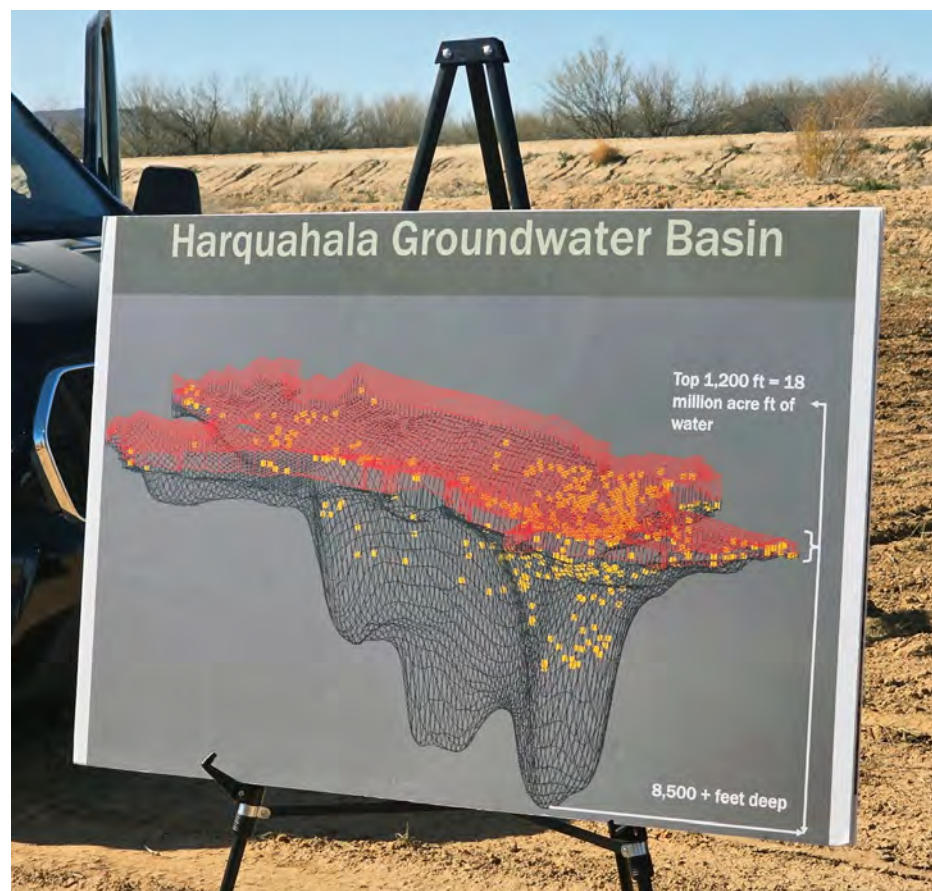
The council voted on Sept. 17 to approve a purchase agreement for the Harquahala water, which locked in the total price of \$244.4 million. On Nov. 19, the council voted to purchase the water using certificates of participation.

The first payment of \$140 million for the water was due on Tuesday, with the second payment of \$104.4 million due on July 15.

The water will be received in increments of 12,000 acre-feet per year over 100 years. An acre-foot is enough water to cover 1 acre in 1 foot of water, or about 326,000 gallons.

Earlier in 2025, the town closed on the purchase of 500,000 acre-feet, or 5,000 acre-feet over 100 years, of Harquahala water for \$40 million.

In total, the town is paying about \$285 million for the Harquahala water. The water will be moved through the



This map looks at the size and depth of the Harquahala Groundwater Basin. (Town of Queen Creek)

Central Arizona Project canal.

With the \$19.3 million shift in funds, the town is beginning the process of pumping water from existing wells, possibly building more wells and establishing “what water treatment is required in order to meet the water quality standards for transporting the water” in the CAP canal, the staff report stated.

There will be three phases to the Harquahala water infrastructure project with water delivery expected within two to five years, the report stated.

The phases will be undertaken concurrently “to remain flexible, incor-

porate new information as it becomes available, and keep the overall schedule moving while regulatory, design and field work proceed,” the report continued.

The action on Wednesday sets in motion the preliminary work for phase one by increasing two service contracts and entering into a third. Swain Electric’s contract with the town increased by \$5 million to \$12.1 million to complete electrical upgrades at 10 well sites.

Southwest Waterworks, doing business as Pumpmans, had its existing town contract increased by \$5 million

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FIND YOUR Financial Sunshine IN QUEEN CREEK

Queen Creek is growing fast—and with that growth comes new opportunities, new challenges, and new financial decisions for local families. From rising home prices to everyday budgeting, many residents are asking an important question: *Is my bank helping me feel confident about my financial future?*

With the opening of its newest branch in Queen Creek, First Credit Union is offering a different answer—one rooted in education, personal service, and smarter banking designed for real life.

An Arizona Credit Union for a Growing Community

First Credit Union's arrival in Queen Creek isn't just about adding another location. It's about becoming a long-term financial partner for families, first-time buyers, small business owners, and anyone looking to make more informed financial decisions.

Banking That Supports Real Life Goals

From first paychecks to first homes—and everything in between—First Credit Union's Queen Creek branch is designed to support real-life milestones with:

- Everyday checking and savings accounts
- Competitive auto, home, and personal loans
- Credit-building tools and guidance
- Business banking support for local entrepreneurs

Smarter Banking in 2026: What Families Really Need

As part of its commitment to financial literacy, First Credit Union encourages families to focus on a few foundational habits that can make a big difference over time:

Five Smart Money Moves Every Family Can Make

1. Build a "realistic" emergency fund: Start small. Even setting aside \$500–\$1,000 can help cover unexpected expenses without relying on credit cards.
2. Know your credit score—and what affects it: Payment history and credit utilization matter more than most people realize. Small changes can have a big impact.
3. Automate savings where possible: Automatic transfers to savings help families stay consistent, even during busy months.
4. Review subscriptions and recurring expenses annually: Many households overspend without realizing it. A yearly review can free up cash for savings or debt reduction.

5. Talk about money as a family: Open conversations help kids and teens build healthy financial habits early—and reduce stress for parents.

These are the kinds of practical conversations First Credit Union staff regularly have with members, helping turn financial goals into manageable steps.

How First Credit Union Is Different

- Local decision-making that reflects the needs of the Queen Creek community
- Built-in financial education, not just online articles but real conversations
- Relationship-based service, where members are encouraged to meet with financial specialists
- Community involvement, including workshops and local partnerships

Why a Local Branch Still Matters

Even in a digital-first world, First Credit Union believes physical branches remain essential—especially when it comes to trust and education.

The Queen Creek location offers a welcoming space where members can ask questions, get guidance, and feel supported—whether they're navigating a major life decision or simply looking to manage money more



Drop by to celebrate our
Grand Opening on April 24 at
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For more information,
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BUSINESS

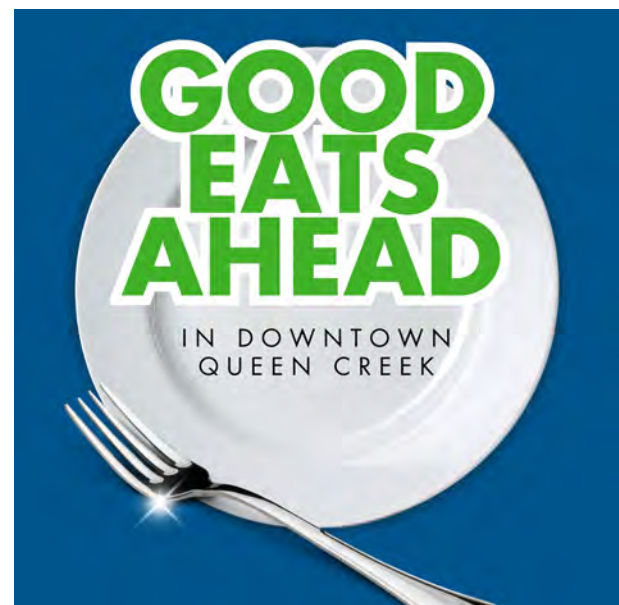
Queen Creek launches ‘Downtown Vibes’



The “Downtown Vibes” campaign was launched to get residents excited about the changes coming to downtown Queen Creek. (Town of Queen Creek)



The campaign was first announced in November. (Town of Queen Creek)



The “Downtown Vibes” campaign will feature signs in the area and spots on social media. (Town of Queen Creek)

By Janet Perez

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

With new restaurants, stores, office space and more coming to downtown Queen Creek, construction in the area is ramping up.

In anticipation of construction frustration and to create excitement for the new developments, Queen Creek recently launched a new ad campaign called “Downtown Vibes.”

The campaign was first announced last fall at a Queen Creek Town Council meeting as part of an overall presentation on the future of downtown.

“This campaign aims to flip the narrative, diverting energy potentially away from frustrations and instead helping the community to view construction as a sign of progress and what’s to come,” Downtown Development Manager Jennifer Lindley told the council at its Nov. 5 meeting.

Development in the area has jumped from 4,000 square feet in 2024 to 230,000 square feet today, signaling \$200 million in private investment.

“We have been planning for our downtown for years, and it is so exciting to see these quality, new developments take our downtown to the next

level,” stated Queen Creek Mayor Julia Wheatley in a town press release. “As a young community — incorporated just 36 years ago — it is incredible to see our downtown vision of a walkable, vibrant gathering space coming to life.

The initial campaign will include A-frame signs throughout the downtown area and social media announcing the initiative. Future elements may include banners, community giveaways and more to promote resident engagement and build excitement for the new projects, according to a staff report.

“I have to say they’re very fun and creative and these concepts will be placed around downtown QC at strategic locations in order to remind the community of the future of this area — and they might make you smile a little bit too,” Lindley told the council.

The ads come in vibrant colors and sport such slogans as “Less Drivin’ More Thrivin,’” “Good Eats Ahead” and “Say hello to your new favorite hangout.”

Projects under construction in downtown Queen Creek include:

- Homewood Suites — Expected to open in

early 2027, the Homewood Suites is located on East Maya Road. When completed, the four-story hotel will have 124 rooms. It will be the town’s second hotel.

- QC Accounting — The business at 22237 S. Ellsworth Road was a recipient of the town’s former façade-improvement program. It has since acquired property to the north of its location, and it has expanded to 5,000 square feet of office space. The expansion is expected to open soon.

- The Sacred Pint — Now open, The Sacred Pint is on what was once the town’s first Circle K and went through several iterations over the years. The 2,587-square-foot taproom is at 22020 S. Ellsworth Road.

- The Perch Development — The 62,093 square feet of commercial development includes a brewery and additional retail/restaurant space. The Perch portion of the development, located on Munoz Street between Ellsworth and Ellsworth Loop roads, is scheduled to open in late 2026.

- Circle K — Long seen as an eyesore in the downtown area, the old Circle K building has been torn down and is being replaced with a more

• See **Vibes** on page 27

FINANCIAL FOCUS®

You have an estate plan — whether you know it or not

Think estate planning is only for the wealthy or elderly? Think again. If you own anything — a home, a car, a savings account, even a pet — you already have an estate plan. The only question is: Did you create it, or will your state do it for you?

When someone passes away without an estate plan, state laws take over, deciding who gets what and when. This legal process may not reflect your wishes. That’s why taking control of your assets through a personal estate plan should be a top priority.

At its core, estate planning is about clarifying your wishes and making things easier for your heirs. It ensures your assets are distributed according to your preferences, designates who will make decisions on your behalf if you can’t and provides guidance for your care in a medical crisis. Most plans include four key components:

- 1. A Will** – This document outlines how your assets should be distributed after your death and names an executor to oversee the process in probate court. It can also designate guardians for minor children. Keep in mind that a will doesn’t cover everything — certain transfer on death (TOD) accounts and jointly held property may bypass your will entirely.
- 2. Power of Attorney** – If you become incapacitated, you’ll want someone you trust to be able to make decisions on your behalf. A durable power of attorney designates such a person, helping to ensure your bills are paid, your business continues (if you have one) and your wishes are honored.
- 3. Health Care Directive** – Sometimes called a living will, this document spells out your preferences for medical treatment if you’re unable to speak for yourself. It can also designate someone to make health care decisions for you.

4. Beneficiary Designations – Accounts like 401(k)s, IRAs, and life insurance policies transfer directly to the people you name, regardless of what your will says. It’s essential to review these beneficiary designations regularly, especially after significant life events such as marriage, divorce, death of a spouse or the birth of a child.

One common myth is that a will is all you need. But wills only take effect after death; they don’t help if you’re alive but unable to make decisions. Another misconception is that estate planning is only for the wealthy. In truth, planning is about more than money — it’s about making things easier for the people you love during difficult times.

An effective estate plan can prevent costly legal battles, reduce confusion and give your loved ones a clear roadmap to follow. It also allows you to leave a legacy that reflects your values and priorities.

As your life changes, your estate plan should change along with it. Review your documents every few years or after major life events. It’s often a good idea to seek help with such reviews. Your financial advisor or attorney can guide you through the process, ensuring your plan fits your unique circumstances.

In the end, estate planning isn’t just about planning for what happens when you are gone. It’s about feeling confident, knowing that what matters most — your family, your purpose, your legacy — is protected.

Edward Jones, its employees and financial advisors cannot provide tax or legal advice. You should consult your attorney or qualified tax advisor regarding your situation.

Mark your calendar for Top 10 Estate Planning Mistakes

Presented by:
Robert Skousen, Estate Attorney
Udall Shumway

To reserve space for yourself and a guest, please call 480-931-3566.



Join us

Tuesday, April 17, 2026
5 - 6 p.m.

Hosted by:
Edward Jones

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Dinner will be served.



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BUSINESS MOVES



QUEEN CREEK BUTCHERY

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

NOW OPEN

1 Family Care Center

37200 N. Gantzel Road, Suite 200

Family Care Center's Queen Creek clinic — its sixth location in Arizona — held a ribbon-cutting ceremony hosted by the Queen Creek Chamber of Commerce on March 11. The center provides mental health services for patients of all ages, including therapy, psychiatry, medication management, and transcranial magnetic stimulation, a non-invasive treatment for depression, anxiety, OCD and more.

2 Kozel Mortgage

22246 S. Ellsworth Road

The Queen Creek Chamber of Commerce hosted a ribbon cutting for The Kozel Mortgage Team Powered by GoRascal on March 16. The firm specializes in "helping borrowers with complex situations, especially self-employed borrowers with write-offs, retirees exploring reverse mortgage options, and individuals navigating home financing during or after divorce," according to its website.

COMING SOON

3 Carnicerias Sonora

Southeast corner of Queen Creek and Signal Butte roads

In the Madera Development, this will be Carnicerias Sonora's sixth Valley location. The full-service butcher shop will feature fresh-cut meats, a hot food bar, bakery with pan dulce, house-made tortillas with authentic Mexican ingredients, fresh produce and specialty products.



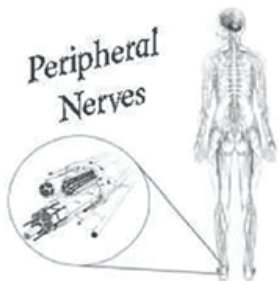
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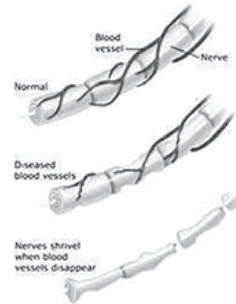
PERIPHERAL NEUROPATHY AND CHRONIC PAIN WARNING!

Mesa, AZ — The most common method your doctor will recommend to treat your chronic pain and/or neuropathy is with prescription drugs that may temporarily reduce your symptoms. These drugs have names such as Gabapentin, Lyrica, Cymbalta, and Neurontin, and are primarily antidepressant or anti-seizure drugs. These drugs may cause you to feel uncomfortable and have a variety of

Chronic pain and/or peripheral neuropathy is a result of damage to the nerves often causing weakness, pain, numbness, tingling, and the most debilitating balance problems. This damage is commonly caused by a hands and feet which causes the nerves to begin to degenerate due to lack of nutrient flow.



As you can see in Figure 2, as the blood vessels that surround the nerves become diseased they shrivel up which causes the nerves to not get the nutrients to continue to survive. When these nerves begin to "die" they cause you to have balance problems, pain, numbness, tingling, burning, and many additional symptoms. The main problem is that your doctor has told you



to just live with the problem or try the drugs which you don't like taking because they make you feel uncomfortable. There is now a facility right here in Mesa that offers you hope without taking those endless drugs with serious side effects.

(See the special neuropathy severity examination at the end of this article) neuropathy three factors must be determined.

- 1) What is the underlying cause?
- 2) How much nerve damage has been sustained.
- 3) How much treatment will your condition require?

NOTE: Once you have sustained 95% nerve loss, there is likely nothing that we can do for you.

The treatment that is provided at Aspen Medical has three main goals.

- 1) Increase blood flow

- 2) Stimulate and increase small fiber nerves

- 3) Decrease brain-based pain

The treatment to increase blood flow, stimulate small nerve fibers and get you back to health is our new \$50,000.00 SANEXAS UNIT!

In addition, we use a state-of-the-art diagnostics like the TM Flow diagnostic unit to accurately determine the increase in blood flow and small skin biopsy to accurately determine the increase in small nerve fibers!

The Sanexas electric cell signaling system delivers energy to the affected area of your body at varying wavelengths, including both low-frequency and middle-frequency signals. It also uses amplitude modulated (AM) and frequency modulated (FM) signaling. During a treatment session, the Sanexas system automatically changes to simultaneously deliver AM and FM electric cell signal energy.

THE GREAT NEWS IS THAT SANEXAS IS COVERED BY MOST INSURANCE! (Medicare restrictions apply) Depending on your coverage, your treatment could be little to no cost to you!

The amount of treatment needed to allow the nerves to fully recover varies from person to person and can only be determined after a detailed neurological and vascular evaluation. As long as you have not sustained at least 95% nerve damage there is hope!

Aspen Medical will do a chronic pain and neuropathy severity examination to determine the extent of the nerve damage as a public service to you and/or your family and friends. This neuropathy/pain severity examination will consist of a detailed sensory evaluation, extensive peripheral vascular testing, and a detailed analysis of the findings of your neuropathy.



Aspen Medical will be offering this chronic pain and neuropathy severity examination from now until May 31, 2026. Call 480-796-1136 to make an appointment to determine if your chronic pain and peripheral neuropathy can be successfully treated.

Due to our busy office schedule, we are limiting this FREE consultation to the first 15 callers. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SUFFER ANOTHER MINUTE, CALL. Call 480-796-1136 ... NOW!

We are extremely busy and if your call goes to our voicemail, please leave a message and we will get back to you asap.

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Mesa, AZ 85206

EDUCATION



Students, teachers and staff at Silver Valley Elementary in the QCUSD celebrate being named an A+ School of Excellence by the Arizona Educational Foundation. (QCUSD)

Silver Valley named school of excellence

Silver Valley Elementary in the Queen Creek Unified School District has been named an A+ School of Excellence by the Arizona Educational Foundation.

Being named an A+ School of Excellence represents years of work and reflection across the Silver Valley community.

“This recognition is not the result of one individual’s efforts, but rather the collective dedication of a united team that shows up every day focused on growth, collaboration and

doing what is best for students,” a district press release stated. “It reflects a school culture grounded in honest conversations, continuous improvement and shared responsibility.

At Silver Valley, clear goals are set and supported. By establishing measurable targets, such as increasing math proficiency by 5% and English language arts by 2%, and building structures to support those goals, continuous improvement has become part of the school’s identity.

A key part of Silver Valley’s suc-

cess is its Lighthouse Leader in Me culture. Students, teachers and teams lead with ownership and accountability, visible in classrooms, hallways and conversations throughout the campus.

Protecting instructional time and emphasizing academic vocabulary and deep understanding have also been critical. Lessons focus on understanding the “why,” not just the “how.”

“Teachers consistently use checks for understanding, asking students

to explain their thinking, compare strategies and learn from mistakes — strengthening reasoning and confidence across grade levels,” the release continues.

The school also focuses on organizational health.

“When data revealed areas for growth, leadership clarified decision-making structures, strengthened leadership capacity and fostered greater autonomy and interdependence among staff,” the release states.



Arizona Leadership

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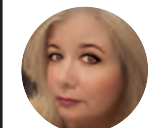
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OPINION

Take the Civility Pledge

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

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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.

Renaming Loop 202 for Charlie Kirk would stoke political friction

As Arizona Democratic Party Chair Charlene Fernandez stated, "In Arizona, the names we place on our public spaces tell a story about who we are and who we aspire to be."

Public roadways are vital conduits connecting diverse communities. These spaces should symbolize unity and progress rather than partisanship or political activism.

Charlie Kirk was a podcaster and an activist, not a public servant or elected official who directly improved the state through legislative or civic action.

Honor of this magnitude should be reserved for those who made universally appreciated contributions such as first responders and military veterans such as John McCain.

Kirk's disparaging comments

Here are some comments about stories happening in your area:

New dog park in Queen Creek opens

"Wow, very nice." — **Billie Kretschman via Nextdoor**

"I wonder if they will have a private area we can take a dog that doesn't play well with other dogs but would appreciate a longer run than our back yard?"

— **Lucee Buchanan via Nextdoor**

"Dogs must be vaccinated too." — **Elizabeth M. via Nextdoor**

The Switchyard to provide some public parking under



Independent Newsmedia

about historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and his criticism of the Civil Rights Act are just a few examples as to why he does not represent shared state values.

This proposal is a slap in the face to Black communities and other minority groups who were targets of his inflammatory rhetoric.

While Charlie Kirk's death is a tragedy, naming a major freeway after a polarizing figure risks alienating residents who disagree with his views, turning a public resource into a source of daily political friction.

SPEAK UP



Queen Creek council agreement

"I would like to know if there are any plans for a parking garage somewhere nearby all of these venues. The parking will be out of control." — **Toni Gurrieri via Nextdoor**

"I am tired of the incessant development. Also wonder what the win is for the town council since so many of them are developers. Would also like to

Please send your comments to **AzOpinions@iniusa.org**.

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

tion.

While many opponents publicly condemn the violence that led to his death, it can also be argued that decrying an assassination does not require making a martyr of the individual or glorifying a divisive legacy through public monuments. What kind of message would/does this send to our children?

Rose Covell
Queen Creek

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.

know how any of this makes peoples lives better as that should be the primary goal of those in public office." — **Arlyn Sikes via Nextdoor**

Queen Creek increases temporary monthly loan amounts to new town

"Why are we starting a new city in debt?" — **Cindy Bertschinger via Nextdoor**

"Another politician who craves tax dollars. Why do we need eight politicians to run STV?" — **Dan McFarland via Nextdoor**

"Will we ever break with Queen Creek?" — **Lawrence Brooks via Nextdoor**



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COUNTY/STATE

Chandler Council discusses ethics policy, takes no action

By Jason W. Brooks
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

A discussion of potential new Chandler City Council policy didn't lead to any official action or even a vote — but it was a lively exchange.

Council member Jane Poston requested an item be placed on the Feb. 26 regular meeting agenda for implementing an ethics policy and possible direction to staff to review and return with recommendations," a staff report states.

But after council grilled Poston during a Feb. 23 study session about which types of issues, situations or conflicts she wanted policy to address, Poston requested the item be withdrawn from the Feb. 26 agenda, which was granted.

The Feb. 23 hour-long discussion didn't really become heated, but became somewhat dicey at times.

Poston said she wanted to involve the entire council and some staff time into researching and assembling either general or detailed ethics policies for the council. She said most large organizations have such policies, though contrasts and comparisons among Arizona governments would have been one of the information-gathering aims of



Chandler City Council member Jane Poston initially proposed studying an ethics policy for the council. But after a lengthy study session discussion, Poston asked for the proposal to be pulled as an action item from a regular meeting. (Courtesy of City of Chandler)

Poston's.

"I don't know what this would look like," Council member Matt Orlando said. "I don't know whether it's going to be a resolution, a policy, an ordinance or on the back of a napkin. I think due diligence would be a good place to start to see what it could look like. We need

to see what's out there, what's not out there, what do we already have. Once we get a package together, we could hold a work session and see if we want to move forward."

Mayor Kevin Hartke was among those struck by the lack of specifics in Poston's request.

"I'm still not hearing the problem yet, that we need to solve," Hartke said.

Poston said she wants to be proactive and get ahead of ethics "before there's a problem," and was responding to criticism from her constituents over the city not having a more detailed policy.

The city's charter only references ethics in the broadest of terms in a few places, deferring to the city manager to create and enforce many types of ethics policies, including those around grants and contracts.

City Attorney Kelly Schwab pointed out that not only are there some state laws in place, but also city anti-bullying, anti-harassment policies as well.

Schwab said her department not only walks new council members through open meetings laws and other regularly encountered ethics areas as part of an onboarding orientation, and attorneys are avail-

able to council regularly for new-found ethics questions.

The general approach taken by a handful of other East Valley cities was discussed, though at least several Arizona municipalities appear to have the same types of general guidance contained in Chandler's charter.

Hartke told Poston he had expected more specifics from her on ethics areas to call for when the Feb. 26 agenda was finalized, and said Feb. 23 there was still time to accomplish such tailoring before the Feb. 26 meeting.

"I was quite clear on what I wanted to do," Hartke said. "I was concerned about council bullying staff. I was concerned about board members acting in improper ways to staff. I had a close, careful mission of what I wanted to do with this. I need to know the mission and the scope."

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APRIL 4, 11, 18, 25

The Pecan Lake Farmers Market

While parents shop, kids can play on inflatables or visit the petting zoo. Families can also tour the gardens or take gardening classes.

8 a.m. - noon

Queen Creek Botanical Gardens
25002 S. 206th St.

APRIL 4

Pruning & Maintaining Your Landscape

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9-11 a.m.

Queen Creek Library
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APRIL 11 & 25



Queen Creek Family Market

Support local artisans by attending the market and buying crafted gifts, home décor, soaps, candles, clothes, kids' items and more.

9 a.m.-2 p.m.

Schnepf Farms
24810 S. Rittenhouse Road

SPRING EVENTS

Easter eggs, olive blossoms and music make for a busy April

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The weather is heating up and so are the activities and area events taking place in April.

From festivals and music to ballet, Queen Creek residents can choose from a host of events to suit many tastes.

Easter Egg-Citement

9 a.m.-4 p.m.

April 4

Schnepf Farms

24810 S. Rittenhouse Road

The whole family can enjoy a petting zoo, train rides, ropes course, jumping pillows and cookie decorating. There will also be photos with the Easter Bunny and, of course, Easter egg hunts for kids. Each age group is capped at under 100 children for a calm, enjoyable experience and with plenty of eggs, toys and full baskets guaranteed, no child leaves disappointed. All rides will be operating, including the roller coaster, carousel, flying farmers and swinging lady bugs.

Chandler Jazz Festival

April 9-12

Dr. A.J. Chandler Park

3 S. Arizona Ave., Chandler

Every April, Downtown Chandler turns the spotlight on its jazz scene with the return of its Chandler Jazz Festival. In celebration of Jazz Appreciation Month, the festival hosts a lineup of local talent spanning genres ranging from traditional and fusion rhythm to smooth jazz. The free, family-friendly event features more than 40 hours of live performances. Festival-goers are encouraged to bring blankets and lawn chairs to the outdoor concert. This is an alcohol and smoke-free event.

The annual Chandler Jazz Festival returns.
(City of Chandler)



Country Thunder

April 9-12

Canyon Moon Ranch

20585 E. Water Way, Florence

If country music is more your jam, the annual Country Thunder festival will bring some of the most popular acts to Central Arizona. This year's lineup includes Gavin Adcock, Lainey Wilson, Brooks & Dunn and Lonestar. Tickets can be purchased per day or for the entire event. Camping is available.

Olive Blossom Festival

8 a.m.-5 p.m.

April 18-19

Queen Creek Olive Mill

25062 S. Meridian Road

The Olive Blossom Festival is an annual celebration of springtime at the Queen Creek Olive Mill. The mill prides itself on making extra virgin olive oil from blossom-to-bottle. This festival is an opportunity to observe the groves in full bloom and understand where the journey begins for every bottle of extra virgin olive oil.

Disney's Alice In Wonderland Jr.

April 23-25

Queen Creek Performing Arts Center

22149 E. Ocotillo Road



(Schnepf Farms)

Travel down the rabbit hole and join Alice in her adventures in Wonderland. Alice chases the White Rabbit, races the Dodo Bird, gets tied up with the Tweedles, raps with a bubble-blowing Caterpillar and beats the Queen of Hearts at her own game.

Cinderella Ballet Presented by Ballet Etudes

April 25-26

Chandler Performing Arts Center

250 N. Arizona Ave., Chandler

Step into a world of magic and transformation with Ballet Etudes' "Cinderella." This two-act ballet follows Cinderella, her wicked stepmother, comical stepsisters and the radiant Fairy Godmother in a timeless tale of hope, love and happily ever after.

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Emergency Responder

Cesar Urena

A native of Queen Creek and a proud alum of Queen Creek Elementary School, Queen Creek Junior High School and Queen Creek High School, Cesar Urena has built a career and family in the town he loves.

He joined the Queen Creek Fire & Medical Department 10 years ago as a firefighter and previously worked with El Mirage for one year. After serving as an engineer, Urena was promoted to captain in 2023 and has now transitioned to emergency medical services.

"I've always felt a strong connection to this community," he said. "Being able to serve the town where I grew up makes this work especially meaningful to me."

Name: Cesar Urena

Age: 35

Business/Organization: Queen Creek Fire & Medical Department

A little about myself: Born and raised in the town of Queen Creek (GO BULLDOGS), and I've always felt a strong connection to this community. My wife and our 2-year-old daughter mean everything to me, and spending time with them is the most important part of my life. I've proudly served as a firefighter with the town of Queen Creek since November 2016 and currently serve as an EMS captain.

What do you think you bring to the local community: As an EMS captain, my goal is to ensure our members are prepared to provide the highest level of care for our residents. We focus on training, strengthening our medical division, and maintaining strong communication with neighboring departments and local hospitals so we can work together and deliver consistent, high-quality care. We also work to keep our equipment and training innovative.

When our community calls for help, they deserve compassionate and professional care. Being able to serve the town where I grew up makes this work especially meaningful to me.

My guiding philosophy: I believe meaningful change happens through consistent effort and steady pressure over time.

Advice to today's youth: Stay curious and question everything, even your own thought process.

Hobbies: In my free time I enjoy running, participating in ultramarathon races, mountain biking and playing with my daughter.

The Queen Creek Independent is pleased to announce Cesar Urena as the April 2026 Hometown Hero bestowed in the category of Emergency Responder. The Queen Creek Independent along with East Valley Institute of Technology and the Queen Creek Olive Mill salute Mr. Urena as this month's Queen Creek Hometown Heroes Awards recipient.



Congratulations from

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NOMINATIONS NEEDED FOR:

Lifetime Achievement: Long standing community member who has consistently stepped forward and exemplified a passion for giving back to the Queen Creek community within any category
Leader of Tomorrow (17 or younger): Youth who shows leadership and involvement within the community

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 Heroes Awards Winners

First Responder: Cesar Urena, Queen Creek Fire & Medical Department

Veteran: Craig Barnes, Navy, Army, National Guard

Entrepreneur: Jared Beauchamp, Owner, Salce

Trailblazer: Karen McLendon, Founder, A Caring Manor Assisted Living

Educator: Jarrod Posner, Teacher and Coach, Benjamin Franklin Charter School - Crismon Campus

Volunteer: Julie Hartman, Volunteer, Town of Queen Creek, Queen Creek Chamber, Central Christian Church

Healthcare: Amy Webster, Founder, Hope Heart Heal Medical Nonprofit

Spiritual Leader: Curt McReynolds, Campus Pastor, CCV Queen Creek

Mentor/Coach: Jake Allen, Teacher/Coach, Crismon High School and Co-Founder, MAW Wrestling Academy

Community Cheerleader: Patty Campbell, Governing Board Member- Queen Creek Unified School District

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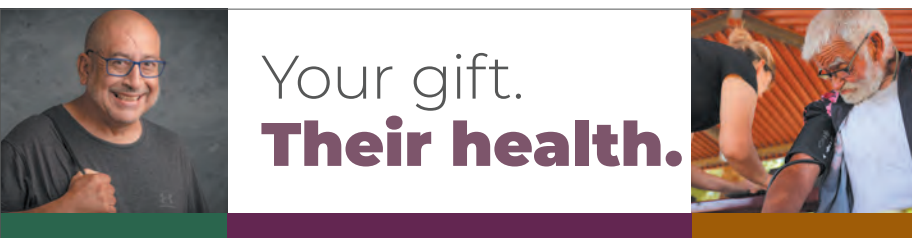
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COUNTY/STATE

Man indicted in connection with alleged fentanyl death of Gilbert woman

A state grand jury has indicted a man on multiple felony charges connected to the alleged sale of fentanyl and the death of a Gilbert woman, according to the Arizona Attorney General's Office.

Attorney General Kris Mayes announced that the grand jury on Feb. 23 indicted Kevin Andrew Muter, who authorities say is also known as Kevin Andrew Mutter, on 15 felony counts.

The charges include one count of conspiracy to sell or transport narcotic drugs and possession of dangerous drugs, one count of sale of lethal fentanyl, one count of manslaughter, five counts of sale or transportation of narcotic drugs, two counts of possession of a dangerous drug, one count of possession or use of drug paraphernalia and four counts of misconduct involving weapons.

According to the indictment, Muter is accused of knowingly selling fentanyl and conspiring with others to sell and transport narcotic drugs between May 1 and May 15, 2025.

Prosecutors allege Muter sold fentanyl on or about May 4 that caused the death of Samantha Dud-



A grand jury indicted Kevin Andrew Muter on multiple felony charges in the drug-related death of a Gilbert woman. (Arizona Attorney General's Office)

ish of Gilbert.

Investigators also allege Muter possessed firearms — including a Ruger .380 handgun and a Cobra handgun — while committing drug felonies and while being a prohibited possessor.

The Gilbert Police Department investigated the case, and it is being prosecuted by the drug and racketeering enforcement section of the Arizona Attorney General's Office.

Opinion

• From page 10

"We are not starting in debt. Technically as a new city we 1) need to pass an interim budget before STV can spend any of the millions of dollars they already have in the bank (from state shared revenue). A budget is going up for a vote early April I believe. 2) The town needed time to get some staff in place

and open bank accounts. 3) They needed time to get software/payment system in place so they can process invoices. These things don't miraculously appear. QC is being a good neighbor and temporarily handling paying our invoices until the town has approved a budget and gets the software/systems needed. Once set, the town will pay QC back for any funds they extended on our behalf." — **Deb Grett via Nextdoor**

EDUCATION

Eastmark earns advanced placement honor

Eastmark High School has earned the Arizona 2025 Advanced Placement School Honor Roll recognition for the second year in a row.

The recognition is based on criteria related to AP exam participation and success.

Only 9% of qualifying Arizona schools earned a Bronze AP School Honor Roll award, according to a press release from the Queen Creek Unified School District.

"We support our students by starting small and building the skills over the course of the school year. We don't expect them to be ready for the test right away," an Eastmark High AP teacher stated in the release. "We build their skills and



Eastmark High School has won the Bronze AP School Honor Roll award for the second year in a row. (QCUSD)

build their confidence. Then we often give them full practice tests so they can know what the test feels like before ever stepping into the

testing room."

When asked what the recognition means to them, a second AP teacher stated, "As teachers, we

are pushing students to challenge themselves but also providing the tools for them to be successful with their challenge, and that means the most to me; that is why I became a teacher."

Another teacher proudly added that the achievement demonstrates students can accomplish whatever they put their minds to.

"Our students can rise to any challenge that we set before them, that they desire to learn at high academic levels, and that they are willing to put in the time, effort and energy that it takes to achieve a qualifying score on the AP tests to get a head start on their college degrees," an Eastmark AP teacher stated in the release.



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COMMUNITY

Work has started on Power Road improvement project

By Janet Perez
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Construction on a road improvement project on Power Road between Riggs Road and Chandler Heights Road is underway.

The Queen Creek Town Council recently voted to authorize the town manager and/or capital improvement projects department director to take the action necessary to move forward

• See **Power Road** on page 26



Work on the Power Road improvement project between Riggs Road and Chandler Heights Road has started. (Town of Queen Creek)



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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

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Mesa • November 13, 2026 • Mesa Marketplace Swap Meet

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BUSINESS

More tenants sign up for The Switchyard



The Switchyard, a \$120M mixed-use project in Queen Creek, is being built on land purchased from the town for \$8.6 million. (Rendering courtesy Creation)

A new wave of tenants is coming to The Switchyard, the \$120 million mixed-use development currently being constructed in downtown.

The Switchyard, which encompasses 10 acres on the northeast corner of Ellsworth Loop and East Ocotillo roads, will have 54,000 square feet of restaurant, retail and office space, plus a 215-residence luxury apartment community.

The project's residential portion is in the design phase. Construction on the retail and office phase began in July. At completion, there will be seven buildings on the site — four single-story buildings with office, retail and restaurant space and three four-story buildings that will house the 215 apartment units along with

more office space.

Newly signed tenants Bamboo Sushi, ROOM and PORCH, Zara Nail Bar and Edward Jones will occupy space within the same building, according to a press release from developer Creation.

Founded in Portland, Oregon, Bamboo Sushi will make its Arizona market debut at The Switchyard. The 3,198-square-foot Queen Creek location will feature signature rolls, happy hour specials, shareable plates and a beverage program rooted in the brand's mission of sustainability, transparency and hospitality.

"We're excited to join The Switchyard and become part of the Queen Creek community," stated

• See **Switchyard** on page 26

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COMMUNITY

Queen Creek annexes Pinal County parcels



The Queen Creek Town Council has approved annexing about 7 acres of land from Pinal County. (Town of Queen Creek)

By Janet Perez
 INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Queen Creek Town Council has approved the annexation of almost 7 acres of Pinal County land in a move some residents claim is the first step toward bringing commercial activity to the area.

The measure to annex two vacant parcels making up 6.9 acres generally located at the southeast corner of Ocotillo and Meridian roads in Pinal County was approved at a recent council meeting. Council Member Robin Benning voted no.

The land in the Country Mini-

Farms community currently is zoned suburban ranch, and under state statute it must receive equivalent zoning from the town.

The parcels are in the town's planning area and under the general plan the area would be zoned for large lot single-family residences and commercial development under certain criteria.

The annexation originally was on the council's consent agenda in which all items are considered through one motion and vote. However, Council Member Jeff Brown requested that the measure

• See **Parcels** on page 23

Parcels

• From page 22

be pulled for a separate discussion and vote.

Moving the item out of the consent agenda allowed two members of the public who oppose the annexation to speak before the council.

Country Mini-Farms resident Mark Linder, who has been a vocal opponent of any moves that might bring commercial development to the area, told council members the community has covenants specifying that the lots are for residential use only and businesses may not operate on the land.

"You're interfering with our contract. You all know the contract exists and you know there's restrictions, yet you're still entertaining this annexation and this rezoning," Linder said. "You're unfairly put-

ting a huge financial strain on our community by pushing this to the courts which is where it's going to end up when we have to fight this developer when they violate our residential use restrictions."

The developer, Redfield Equity, has informed town staff that, sometime in the future, it may request that the property be rezoned to C-1 commercial following annexation. Any future rezoning must be approved by the council.

"At this time, again, there's no concurrent request to rezone the property," said Sarah Clark, a principal planner for the town. "It is just a request to have these two parcels annexed into the town of Queen Creek's boundaries."

Before the meeting, Brown said that if the property owners do ultimately ask for a rezone, "we must according to state law allow the private property owner to ask for it to be considered for an up/down

vote by the town council."

Of the two parcels up for annexation, the first includes a single-family home with a tenant who is raising a small number of cattle in the rear yard.

The second parcel includes an existing home that was being used for the staging of fiber optic cable being installed in the area, which is not a permitted use under the current Pinal County zoning and would not be permitted under Queen Creek's zoning, according to a staff report.

"The property was issued a notice of violation by the county. The property owner ceased all operations and removed all materials and equipment. The site is now in compliance, and the county code case is closed," the report continued.

Benning voted against the annexation because he said it would not have a cost-benefit to the town.

"It's been my practice that we accept annexations where bare dirt will then develop and will achieve a development payment through development and impact fees for the updated property to come onto the rolls as a town property," he said. "In this case, I would say I don't see the nexus. Instead, what I see is we're taking two residential properties and we're accepting the burden of providing services to those residential properties with no financial give back to the town."

The annexation is effective on April 6.

Janet Perez can be reached at jperrez@iniusa.org. Please send your comments about this article to AzOpinions@iniusa.org. We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.



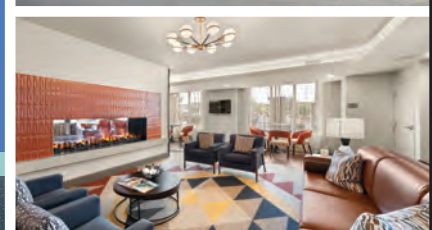
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SAN TAN VALLEY

Town increases temporary monthly loan amounts to San Tan Valley



The temporary monthly loans from Queen Creek will pay for town of San Tan Valley salaries such as town manager until it has authority to start spending state-shared revenues. On Dec. 3, the San Tan Valley Town Council hired Brent Billingsley, center, as its first town manager. (Pinal County)

By Janet Perez

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Queen Creek is increasing the amount of the temporary monthly loans it provides to the new town of San Tan Valley as it gets its government up and running.

The Queen Creek Town Council recently voted to amend the intergovernmental agreement it has with the new town.

In November, Queen Creek and San Tan Valley entered into an agreement in which Queen Creek will provide the new town with an up to \$250,000-a-month loan. Under the amended agreement that loan will increase to up to \$450,000 a month.

While the town of San Tan Valley has now received its state-shared revenues, it still does not have the budget

authority to spend it.

Since November, the amount requested by San Tan Valley has averaged about \$100,000 to \$150,000 a month, but larger expenditures are expected to come soon, according to a staff report.

"Such partnerships foster trust and build long-term relationships that benefit, not only the two municipalities, but the entire region," the report continued. "By supporting an adjacent municipality in its early stages, the town not only contributes to regional stability but also reinforces the collective strength and sustainability of the East Valley."

San Tan Valley has until Nov. 1 or when it gets the authority to start spending state-shared revenues to begin paying back Queen Creek through

• See **Loan** on page 25



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INDEPENDENT
 NEWS MEDIA

Loan

• From page 24

minimum monthly payments of \$250,000.

“Hopefully that helps everyone understand this would not be an ongoing situation. This is a rarity in the state of Arizona when a new municipality is incorporated — I mean, rare like happens not even once per decade — and especially in this instance when San Tan Valley is at 100,000 population or even exceeding that,” Council Member Jeff Brown said during the meeting. “They just have to get some things in motion between now and July 1st when they actually go live.”

The monthly loans will allow the new town to pay the salaries of a town manager, town clerk and finance director.

Along with the salaries, Queen Creek is directly paying invoices from San Tan Valley’s vendors, contractors

or agencies for verified expenses.

The money comes from Queen Creek’s general fund savings and San Tan Valley will reimburse the town all advanced funds at 4% of the annual percentage rate, which is what the town receives from an interest-bearing account.

On Aug. 5, residents of a portion of unincorporated San Tan Valley voted in favor of incorporating the area. The successful incorporation drive started in 2023 and was spearheaded by San Tan Valley Inc. Past efforts to incorporate San Tan Valley failed in 2004, 2010 and 2017.

On July 1, 2026, the Pinal County Board of Supervisors will pass all responsibility for the area to the new town leaders.

Janet Perez can be reached at jperez@iniusa.org. Please send your comments about this article to AzOpinions@iniusa.org. We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.

Biz Moves

• From page 6

4 Aubergine Kitchen Rittenhouse and Ellsworth Loop roads

Already in Mesa, Aubergine Kitchen is opening its second Valley location in Queen Creek. The eatery has locations throughout Idaho, Utah and Nevada. Aubergine Kitchen specializes in nutrient-rich food made with fresh ingredients. It offers bowls, entrees, salads, melts, smoothies and more.

5 Sal’s Queen Creek Pizza Power and Chandler Heights roads

Sal’s Gilbert Pizza will be opening a location in Queen Creek called Sal’s Queen Creek Pizza. As with the Gilbert location, Sal’s will be offering New York-style pizza. It’s namesake was born in Sicily, moved

to New York City and attended the Institute of Culinary Education. Sal’s opened in Gilbert in 2006. Besides pizza, Sal’s has traditional Italian dishes.

6 Queen Creek Butchery Power and Chandler Heights roads

Another Gilbert business, The Gilbert Butcher, is expanding into Queen Creek and opening the Queen Creek Butchery. Founded by Dan and Krista Roosevelt, the butchery provides meats, fish, poultry and even homemade sausage. The family-owned business prides itself on providing personal service and sustainability, with a focus on natural fine meats and humane practices.

If you have a new business that has just opened, is under construction or is celebrating an anniversary, please contact jperez@iniusa.org.



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Power Road

• From page 20

on contracts in an amount not to exceed more than \$9.6 million for the Power Road project.

The project will include:

- ♦ Widening the road to provide two lanes in each direction.

- ♦ Bicycle lanes.

- ♦ New traffic signals at Cloud Road incorporating an equestrian crossing and sidewalk on the east side.

- ♦ Signs and street lighting.

- ♦ A newly constructed, relocated storm drainage channel and box culvert, along with modifications to the town's water main.

- ♦ Landscaping and irrigation.

For the 2025-26 fiscal year, the town budgeted more than \$14.1 million for the project.

On March 2, 2022, the council approved an almost \$665,000 pro-

fessional services project work order with Stantec Consulting Services Inc. for engineering design services for the Power Road project. The engineers' estimate for construction of the project was more than \$9.7 million, according to a staff report.

On Jan. 6, the town received 10 bids ranging from \$10.5 million to the low-bid award of \$7.8 million from Sunland Asphalt.

The authorized \$9.6 million will also allow contracts that include materials testing, street lighting and traffic signal power work, and some San Tan Irrigation District improvements.

Construction is set to be completed in December.

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Switchyard

• From page 21

Ava Brenneke, marketing director for Bamboo Sushi, in the release. "The opening reflects Bamboo Sushi's continued expansion into vibrant, community-focused destinations that value quality, sustainability and connection."

ROOM and PORCH, a 1,761-square-foot home goods and lifestyle store, will introduce furnishings and décor to the project. Zara Nail Bar will occupy 3,519 square feet, offering a full-service nail salon experience. Financial services firm Edward Jones will also open an office at The Switchyard.

The latest additions joined previously announced restaurant tenants Snooze, an A.M. Eatery, Shake Shack and Postino, all of which are expected to open by the end of the year.

"The caliber of tenants joining The Switchyard reflects the demand we're seeing for a concentrated dining and retail environment in Queen Creek," stated David Sellers, co-founder of Creation, in the release. "As the buildings rise, the leasing activity behind them confirms that this district is resonating with both national brands and local concepts looking to be part of the town's growth."

The Switchyard will feature walkable pathways, outdoor gathering areas and a cohesive architectural styled intended to anchor Queen Creek's Town Center.

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Council

- From page 2

to \$17.1 million to inspect, rehabilitate wells and complete test pumping.

The engineering firm of Hazen and Sawyer is receiving a services contract from the town worth \$400,000 for consultation on the water infrastructure project.

An additional \$1.9 million in budget capacity will be transferred for future contracts for the preliminary work.

"Based on the estimates available at the current time, the three phases ... are an additional \$180 million. The total cost for the Harquahala water purchase is currently estimated to be \$465 million, excluding financing costs. The \$19.3 million represents the initial spending of this \$180 million," according to the staff report.

Money for projects that are being eliminated and deferred will be moved from the drainage and transportation

fund and water capital fund to the water resource fund.

Purchasing Harquahala Valley water is an important part of the town's overall goal to become a designated water provider by January 2027, eliminating its dependence on the Central Arizona Groundwater Replenishment District, or CAGRDR.

Once the town becomes a designated water provider, the CAGRDR fee charged on residents' property taxes will be eliminated. Staff is currently evaluating and developing a future water resource fee that will eventually serve as the dedicated funding source for water purchases. Residents will not begin paying that fee until the CAGRDR charge is eliminated.

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Vibes

- From page 4

modern design. Located at 21895 S. Ellsworth Road, the new store will be about 5,200 square feet.

- The Switchyard — Located on about 8 acres of formerly town-owned land, the first phase of The Switchyard will include a mix of restaurant, retail and office space totaling just under 48,000 square feet. Phase two will include luxury multifamily housing. The first phase is set to open in the third quarter for 2026. Postino, Shake Shack and Snooze have announced locations in phase one. The Switchyard is located at Ellsworth Loop and Ocotillo roads.

- Rusty Buckle Saloon — The 8,930-square-foot bar and restaurant is in the permitting process and is set to open in mid-2026 at 21838 S. Ellsworth Road.

- Magma Plaza — The old Magma Engineering at 20955 E. Ocotillo Road will be torn down to make room for an 8,500-square-foot commercial development. The project is still going through the permitting process.

- The Matheson — Located on the southeast corner of Ellsworth Loop and Ocotillo roads, the completed development will bring 20,000 square feet of medical office space to the Downtown Core. It is expected to start the permitting process soon.

"Public outreach on construction happening today helps residents stay informed and get excited about how these projects are shaping the heart of our community," Wheatley stated.

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EDUCATION

Queen Creek High theater company earns top marks

The Queen Creek High School Theatre Company recently showcased its talent at multiple major theater events, earning top honors and statewide recognition for the 2024–2025 school year.

Under the direction of theater director Nicholas Smith, 44 QCHS Theatre Company students attended the Arizona State Thespian Festival in Phoenix on January 19–20.

The troupe was selected to perform its fall production, “A Murder is Announced,” in front of an audience of about 2,500 attendees. In addition, the company was named a Gold Honor Troupe, celebrating its achievements throughout the school year, according to a press release from the Queen Creek Unified School District.

Students also earned a superior ranking plaque for the one-act musical, “Anastasia: Youth Edition,” directed by senior Kamden Tinsley.

The school’s Run With It Improv competed for the first time, while the tech challenge team made up of students Parker Frease, Claire Manzke,



The Queen Creek High School Theatre Company was named a Gold Honor Troupe at the recent Arizona State Thespian Festival in Phoenix. (QCUSD)

Estella Witz and Elias Miley placed second place overall out of 57 teams from across the state.

At the Eastern Arizona Festival of Theatre, QCHS students earned 30 superior rankings, 13 excellent rankings and a second-place overall finish in the BACKStage Challenge.

The QCHS Theatre Company also recently hosted three classroom performances, including sold-out shows of “Anastasia: Youth Edition” and “Appropriate Audience Behavior,” both directed by Elias Miley.

The performances also included the premiere of an original one-act

play written and performed by the Queen Creek Junior High Drama Club as part of a growing partnership between the two programs, the release continued.

The QCHS Theatre Company’s upcoming spring musical will “Big Fish: School Edition.”



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Park

• From page 1

Starting in earnest five years ago, the Queen Creek Town Council vote in December 2021 to fund new park facilities as part of phase 1 of its parks master plan.

The town broke ground on the 85-acre Frontier Family Park, 20039 S. 220th St., in August 2022 and it opened in June 2024. The 13-acre expansion of Carter Mansel Oasis Park, 19535 E. Appleby Road, opened in July 2024.

Construction on the \$67.9 million Queen Creek Recreation & Aquatic Center, located within Frontier Family Park, started in May 2023 with the center opening in March 2025.

The cost of Frontier Family Park, the recreation and aquatic center and the expansion of Mansel Carter Oasis Park was about \$160 million.

With a new police headquarters being built where the Pocket Park for Pups once stood near town hall, the dog hangout had to be moved across the street to Founders' Park. The pocket park was permanently closed on March 20.

Last year, the council established budgets totaling more than \$2.9 million for the dog park relocation, as well as replacement playground equipment for Founders' Park. The new playground area also opened on March 21.

"I appreciate (the dog park's) proximity to the newly renovated playground and other amenities of Founders Park, including the town's largest splash pad," McClure said.

As with the old one, the new dog park has two separate sides and entries for large and active dogs, and small and timid dogs.

The dog park area itself doubled in size compared to the old location. In addition, it has two large canopies to provide shade to the canines and their humans. Trees are also being planted around the site. The new location also provides more parking.



Members of the Queen Creek Town Council gathered with residents for an official ribbon cutting at the new dog park. (Town of Queen Creek)

Perhaps the biggest change is that each section of dog park has a mirror location, or cell, next to it. The cells will open at alternate times so one side can get a deep watering and recover as the other side is being used. This will allow for healthy grass year-round.

"The new dog park creates our strong sense of community for dog lovers and provides more shade than the previous pocket park that was designed to be temporary," McClure said. "This facility provides greater capacity for both small and large dogs with the ability to rotate sides to keep the grass healthy."

The Pocket Park for Pups used to close for a month every summer for re-seeding and irrigation.

Moving the dog park to Founders' Park has necessitated permanently relocating the annual Founders' Day celebration to Frontier Family Park. But that doesn't make the new configuration of Founders' Park any less of a community space.

"The focus of the dog park is it's a social space. It's not just socialization for the dogs, which is fantastic, and exercise for the dogs, but it also continues to be socialization for Queen Creek residents," Parks and Recreation Director Adam Robinson said before the park opened. "One of the best parts about a dog park is how it really connects that community."

As of now, the town has no new parks planned for the near future, but it

is still working to develop recreational opportunities for residents.

Queen Creek is looking at possibly using town-owned properties for "low-cost recreational uses, such as biking and hiking trails, disc golf, BMX tracks, and other similar activities," according to a staff report from January 2025.

The opening of Frontier Family Park and the expansion of Carter Mansel Oasis Park were part of parks and recreation master plans adopted in 2005, 2007 and 2018 to address the town's shortage of park land acreage.

While the town has purchased hundreds of acres that can be used for parks, development has a long turnaround and traditional amenities are expensive, which is why only four sites are currently being looked at for limited and low-cost recreational uses.

The next big effort for parks will be updating the parks and recreation master plan for 2028.



The new park offers dogs and owners plenty of places to sit in the shade. (Town of Queen Creek)

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Police

• From page 1

in the form of human trafficking.

Because most teens at the larger group homes do not come from Queen Creek, finding them right away is paramount so they do not slip into other cities and even states where the danger to them rises exponentially, officials said.

In 2024, 18% of the children who were reported missing from social services were likely victims of child sex trafficking.

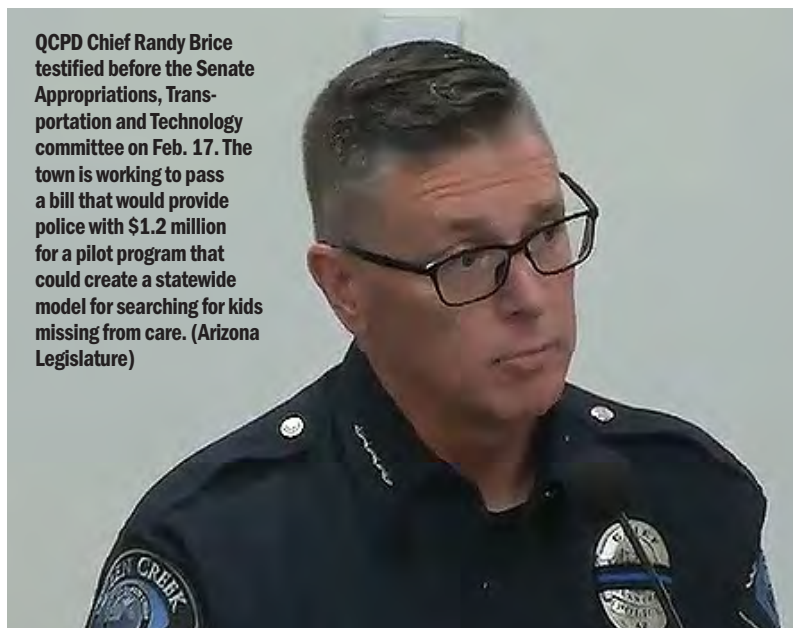
Brice said his department averages about one week in finding the missing teens even if they are outside of Queen Creek or even the state.

"To me, a week is too long because of the things that happened to them. We're finding them in other states, other cities, hidden in motel rooms, other residences," Brice said during a recent Queen Creek Town Council meeting where he provided an update on missing teens and what is being done to keep them safe. "Two kids were found in a motel room, and I won't get into the details of what was happening, but it was not good."

Queen Creek Council Member Leah Martineau works for the Arizona Anti-Trafficking Network, which is aimed at raising awareness, reducing demand and fostering prevention efforts with youth in pursuit of eliminating human trafficking in Arizona. She said these stories are hard to hear, but they cannot be ignored.

"This is the dark world that we live in right now. Talking about this, it's hard to hear but we have to because we have to know what really is happening in our society — not sugarcoating it or turning a blind eye to this," Martineau said at the meeting.

QCPD Chief Randy Brice testified before the Senate Appropriations, Transportation and Technology committee on Feb. 17. The town is working to pass a bill that would provide police with \$1.2 million for a pilot program that could create a statewide model for searching for kids missing from care. (Arizona Legislature)



One effort to help find teens missing from care is a bill that would allocate \$1.2 million to QCPD to create a pilot program that could be expanded statewide to help improve finding children who go missing from group homes.

The bill, making its way through the state Senate, is being championed by Sen. David Farnsworth, R-Mesa, who announced in December the legislation was in response to "the growing issue of runaway and missing youth from group homes."

Under Senate Bill 1550, the pilot program would develop specialized law enforcement focusing on:

- Prevention of incidents of runaway youth.
 - Protection of at-risk youth from exploitation.
 - Enhancement of the investigative capability of the police department.
 - Strengthening collaboration with care providers and state agencies.
 - Production of a model framework for statewide replication.
- "This is a program we've ac-

tually started developing already, but we see the benefit of regionalizing it and making this a model for the rest of the state because of the things that we're discovering as we continue to ramp this program up," Brice said.

Called "Missing from Care," the QCPD's program is a "coordinated community effort built on prevention, rapid collaboration and thorough investigation," according to a staff report.

Through the program, QCPD works with group homes, the Arizona Department of Child Safety, nongovernmental organizations, schools and advocacy groups to "create a unified safety net around our most vulnerable youth," the report continued.

Rite of Passage, which operates Canyon State Academy and Desert Lily Academy did not return requests for comment on their work with QCPD.

To try to prevent children from going missing from group homes, QCPD works with staff to share risk assessments, establish protocols for sharing information, engage with youth to build trust and foster a proactive partnership.

The goal is to get the responding officers all information needed to immediately start an investigation.

But law enforcement is hampered by a current state statute that does not provide a time frame for when children have to be reported missing to state agencies. When the state does get the report, it has 24 hours to notify law enforcement.

To circumvent this, QCPD is working with the group homes to quickly contact police if a child is missing from care.

"We have a very specific protocol with these group homes that you call immediately when you suspect or notice that someone's missing. We don't want you going out to try and find them yourself, scouring the campus," Brice said in the interview. "We don't want any of that. Even if they're there and it's a mistake, you call us right away because we have a very specific response protocol that's been very successful."

Brice said the department has "placed an inordinate amount of pressure on (group homes) to do very specific things to help our program along, so that we're keeping these kids safe."

Desert Canyon and Desert Lily in particular are large enterprises designed like school campuses and not juvenile detention centers. "It's not a prison. They certainly aren't set up like a detention center of any kind. It's a campus that's set for vocational training and treatment and a variety of other programs," Brice said in the interview "There are some legitimate difficulties that they have that we're working with them on that are just because of the nature of the campus."

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