

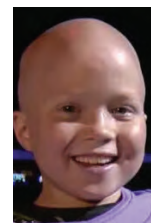


Business

Business owner finds success away from the stage; **6**



GILBERT INDEPENDENT



Neighbors

Skaters rally to remember Gilbert girl; **16**

May 2026

Volume 5 Issue 5

Your Nonpartisan Community Newspaper • YourValley.net

Gilbert proposes \$2.55B budget amid revenue losses

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Gilbert officials are proposing a \$2.55 billion budget for fiscal year 2027, an increase of about \$93 million — or roughly 3.8% — from the current year, even as the town grapples with a \$20 million loss in ongoing revenue.

The proposed spending plan reflects a balancing act between maintaining core services and limiting new investments amid financial pressures largely outside the town's control.

"The budget for the town of Gilbert is not just one big pot of money that's unrestricted," Budget Director Kelly Pfost said. "When we say that we're balancing the budget, we're not just balancing one budget, we're balancing several dozen budgets."

The town's financial outlook is driven by multiple external factors, including the loss of residential rental sales tax revenue, changes to state income tax policy and the incorporation of San Tan Valley, all of which combine to re-

• See **Budget** on page **30**

Paralympian Chris Hammer builds gold-medal life in Gilbert

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The assignment seemed simple enough: learn to tie your shoes and show the class.

For Chris Hammer, it came with an asterisk — one his teacher thought should excuse him. Born with one hand, Hammer was told he didn't have to complete the task.

His parents disagreed.

"I went home and learned how to tie my shoes and did it in class when everyone else was," Hammer said.

It's a small story, one Hammer admits

• See **Hammer** on page **28**



Chris Hammer won the gold medal at the Paris Paralympics in 2024. (USA Triathlon)

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Public hearing set on proposed tax levy

The town of Gilbert has scheduled two public hearings on a proposed secondary property tax levy for fiscal 2026-27 that would keep the tax rate unchanged for a fourth year.

The proposed levy maintains a tax rate of 98 cents per \$100 of assessed property value, according to town documents.

One public hearing on the proposed levy is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 19, in the Town Council Chambers at 50 E. Civic Center Drive. A second and final hearing will be held at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 9, followed by discussion and a vote during the regular council meeting.

Go to: tinyurl.com/3uw8bppn

Giving machines boost East Valley nonprofits

Gilbert's Light the World Giving Machines drew thousands in donations for local nonprofits, according to Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officials.

Receiving support were: Positive Paths (\$62,600), Paz de Cristo Community Center (\$107,500), One Small Step (\$80,049), Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest (\$139,700) and Lauren's Institute for Education (\$84,297).

Go to: tinyurl.com/3vpfww7k

MEETINGS

Gilbert Town Council

6:30 p.m. May 19

6:30 p.m. June 9

50 E. Civic Center Drive, Gilbert
480-503-6871

www.gilbertaz.gov

Decision nears on proposed Target after two delays in Gilbert



A rendering shows a proposed Target that has come under fire from residents in Gilbert. (Courtesy town of Gilbert)

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

A decision is approaching on a proposed Target-anchored shopping center at Higley and Ocotillo roads after the Gilbert Town Council delayed the case twice in April amid sustained neighborhood opposition and calls for further refinement of the project.

The zoning request, which would allow a roughly 128,000-square-foot Target store on about 16 acres in the Marbella Vineyards area, is scheduled for consideration May 19 following continuances on April 7 and April 21.

The proposal hinges on a shift from the site's existing shopping center zoning to general commercial, a change that would permit a single tenant larger than 75,000 square feet. Town staff have said the overall development intensity would be similar to what is already allowed, but the configuration would consolidate square footage into one large retailer rather than multiple smaller businesses.

The first delay came after a lengthy public hearing dominated

by residents voicing concerns about traffic, safety and how the project would fit with surrounding neighborhoods. Council members heard hours of testimony before opting to continue the case rather than take a vote.

"I've given a lot of thought to this project, and I really hesitate that this project hits the area out there and there's tremendous residential opposition to this," Vice Mayor Bobbi Buchli said.

Residents repeatedly pointed to the intersection of Higley and Ocotillo as already heavily impacted, raising questions about whether the added traffic from a big-box retailer would overwhelm nearby roads and spill into residential streets.

"My concern is whether this rezoning at this intersection lines with Gilbert's plan and standard," resident Duane Sledge said. "Higley and Ocotillo are already functioning as high-stress arterial intersections, especially during peak hours and weekends."

Others focused on neighborhood access points, particularly along Wilson Way, where residents said

traffic patterns could lead drivers to cut through local streets.

"What I think is going to happen is the patrons that go into Target are going to determine they can't make a left-hand turn out of Wilson ... and that they're going to want to then make a right-hand turn ... and go through our residential area," resident Shelly Faigle said.

Concerns extended beyond traffic to the scale of the development itself. Several speakers argued the proposed store would be out of character with the surrounding area.

"This thing is massive," resident Chad Brossman said. "One hundred thirty thousand square feet, nearly twice what the SC is allotted for."

Residents also warned the zoning change could set a precedent for more intense commercial development along corridors near established neighborhoods.

"The rezoning also represents a clear increase in intensity compared to surrounding uses," Sledge said. "Once that intensity is approved, it's very difficult to reverse it."

• See **Target** on page 13

Gilbert narrows town manager search to two finalists

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Gilbert has narrowed its search for its next town manager to two finalists, selecting internal candidate Mario Paniagua and external candidate Alison Zelms to advance in the process.

The decision follows a public forum that featured four finalists and comes as the town looks to replace former Town Manager Patrick Banger, who left earlier this year to become city manager in Glendale.

The remaining candidates — Paniagua, Gilbert's assistant town manager, and Zelms, the city manager in Rochester, Minnesota — represent two different paths forward: continuity from within and outside experience shaped in other communities.

The town released a statement that said the finalists bring strong qualifications and reflect the priorities identified throughout the process.

"We've been thorough, thoughtful, and intentional throughout this process because we understand the importance of this decision for our organization and community," Mayor Scott Anderson said in the release. "I'm confident we're on the right path toward selecting a leader who will serve our community and support our incredible workforce with excellence."

Paniagua emerged from within Gilbert's leadership team, having joined the town only months before Banger's



Alison Zelms, left, and Mario Paniagua are the finalists for Gilbert's town manager job. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

departure. At the public forum, he acknowledged the unexpected timing but said the opportunity ultimately led him to pursue the role.

"I did not expect Patrick to leave within months of the arrival, so that was a bit of a shock," he said.

He framed the position as a rare opportunity tied closely to his growing connection to the community.

"This is really a once-in-a-career opportunity," Paniagua said. "I love Gilbert so much — the more I've been here, the

more I'm attached to it."

Paniagua emphasized the town's financial outlook as the top issue facing the next manager, pointing to a structurally balanced budget in the short term but longer-term gaps tied to service demands and infrastructure needs.

"We're able to bring forward a balanced budget this year," he said, "but we also realize that there are some severe needs that the community has, some strong needs that the community has that we're just not able to meet moving forward."



He also highlighted economic development as a critical focus as Gilbert approaches buildout, along with the growing need to reinvest in aging infrastructure.

"We've got to really make sure that we strengthen and bolster the approach that we have for economic development," he said.

Zelms, by contrast, would bring experience from outside Gilbert, including leadership roles in Arizona communities such as Prescott and Sedona

• See **Search** on page 27

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Climate activists turn back Turning Point push in SRP vote

A slate of climate activist candidates got a lopsided win in the Salt River Project election over those backed by Turning Point Action, a conservative group that wanted to curb environmentalists' influence over the largest public utility in the country.

The "Clean Energy" candidates won a majority on SRP's board while increasing their representation on the Tempe-based utility's advisory councils.

Two candidates, who had business-community support and Turning Point backing, retained the board's presidency and vice presidency, results showed. They were Chris Dobson for president and Barry Paceley for vice president.

Go to: tinyurl.com/4n6chn3u

Gilbert veterinary center sells for \$11.2M

An entity tied to Harpreet Grewal purchased the Arizona Veterinary Specialty Center in Gilbert for \$11.21 million on March 2, according to commercial real-estate website vizzda.com.

The single-story, four-tenant veterinary complex totals about 28,805 square feet on 1.97 acres zoned general commercial in the Town of Gilbert. The property was built in 2005.

Current tenants include Thrive Pet Healthcare, Desert Veterinary Medical Specialists, Southwest Veterinary Surgical Service and NVA.

Go to: tinyurl.com/42mwajjy

From stage to signs: Peppur Chambers finds creativity in business

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Peppur Chambers sees a connection between her work at Collaborative Sign & Design and her former career in the arts that most people might not see.

"We are producing something with a greater good that has a beginning, middle and end," Chambers said. "You just make it run, and that's exciting."

For Chambers, that description applies as much to a sign as it once did to a stage production.

Her career began far from the sign industry. Raised in Wisconsin, she studied advertising at Marquette University before dancing professionally with the Milwaukee Bucks and Chicago Bulls.

"Paula Abdul was a Laker girl," Chambers said. "So that's how I got to dancing in the NBA. I was like, 'Well, she did it. I could do it.'"

After working in investments, she left to pursue performing full time, a decision that took her to New York and Los Angeles. There, she acted, wrote and eventually produced her own work, a time she admits was "terrifying."

"If I don't make my own work and make my own way, I'm not going to work," she said.

That mindset carried her through multiple career shifts, including time in Prague where she cofounded a theater company. Years later, another pivot came after she married and moved to Arizona during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2024, when her husband's job in film financing ended, the couple decided to start a business together.

"We had our most recent pivot, and we started a sign company."



Peppur Chambers puts her strengths in relating to people to work in her role at Collaborative Sign & Design. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

Chambers said.

They launched Collaborative Sign & Design in early 2025. Chambers handles marketing and strategy, while her husband oversees operations. The company works with vendors to produce a wide range of signs, from window graphics to large commercial installations.

Chambers said the business aims to stand out by focusing on relationships rather than transactions.

"This business can be very transactional — what's the sign, when do you need it, when it's done, see you later," she said. "But we really want to be a guide for people and to help them through the process."

About a year in, she said the work

offers a different kind of satisfaction than her years in performance.

"It's fulfilling in different ways," she said. "I'm enjoying building something ... we're validating ourselves."

For Chambers, the path reflects a broader lesson shaped by years of reinvention.

"To know that you can do something like this too," she said, "is important."

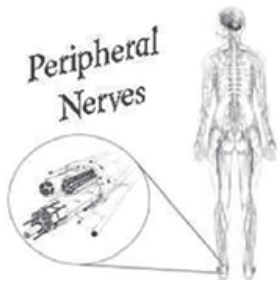
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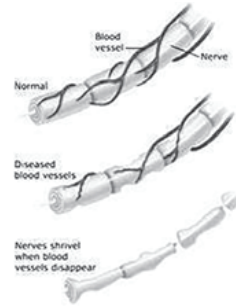
PERIPHERAL NEUROPATHY AND CHRONIC PAIN WARNING!

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 harmful side effects.

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) In order to effectively treat your neuropathy three factors must be determined.

- 1) What is the underlying cause?
- 2) How much nerve damage has been sustained?

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

- 3) How much treatment will your condition require?

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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 June 30, 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!**

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BUSINESS MOVES



Compiled by Tom Blodgett

NOW OPEN

1 Aldi opened a location April 23 at 1221 N. Arizona Ave., Gilbert. It is a German-based, family-owned discount supermarket chain known for its high-efficiency, no-frills, low-cost model that sells private-label products sold in smaller store layouts. 855-955-2534. www.aldi.us

2 Angie's Prime Grill opened April 3 at 4984 S. Power Road, Gilbert, in the Gateway Towne Center. It is an Arizona-based, drive-thru-only restaurant chain aimed at making luxury food affordable. It serves high-quality USDA Prime steak, antibiotic-free chicken and wild-caught seafood in bowls, salads, and burritos at fast-food prices. www.angies.com

3 Crystal Hoarder opened a second Gilbert location in February inside Candle Chemistry at 51 W. Vaughn Ave., Suite 101, Gilbert. It offers a curated selection of high-quality crystals and minerals, including polished gemstones like labradorite and amethyst, unique agate slabs and crystal bonsai trees. <https://crystalhoarder.com>

4 Dual Aesthetics opened Feb. 1 at 7 E. Palo Verde St., Suite 11, Gilbert. It is a facial studio. 520-900-5971. <https://www.dualaesthetics.com>

5 Elle & Benn opened March 28 at 2270 E. Williams Field Road, Suite 107, Gilbert, in the SanTan Village mall. The women's clothing boutique has curated modern classics, including denim, shoes, and accessories. 480-382-9414. <https://ellebenn.com/>

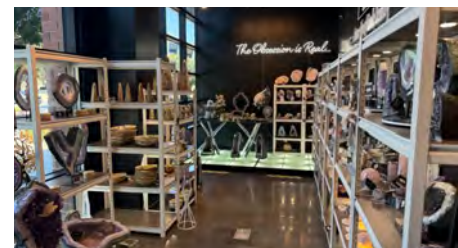
6 Hello Baby Imaging opened Feb. 12 in the Desert Bloom Birth Center at 875 N. Greenfield Road, Suite 101, Gilbert. It does 3D/4D ultrasound imaging. Patients do not need to be clients of the birth center to use it. 928-243-0804. www.hellobabyimagingaz.com

7 JP Morgan Chase Bank opened a branch Dec. 30 at 3572 S. Power Road, Gilbert. It offers personal and business banking services. 480-993-0131. www.chase.com

8 Mo' Bettahs Hawaiian Style Food opened its first Arizona location May 4 at 5378 S. Power Road, Gilbert. Founded in 2008 by Hawaii-born brothers Kimo and Kalani Mack, the fast-casual restaurant serves Hawaiian-style plate lunches featuring items such as teriyaki chicken or steak, kalua pig, katsu chicken and shrimp tempura, served with rice and macaroni salad. Mobettahs.com

9 Platinum Salon Spa and IV Therapy opened Nov. 15 at 2206 E. Williams Field Road, Suite 106, Gilbert, in the SanTan Village mall. It offers IV hydration therapy alongside beauty services including bleaching, highlighting, haircuts, styling, manicures, pedicures, three aesthetic injectables, signature facials, permanent makeup, paramedical tattoo and body beauty treatments. 480-798-4237. www.platinumsalonandspaaz.com

10 Portland Leather Goods opened a location Nov. 22 at 2206 E.



CRYSTAL HOARDER

(Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)



MO'BETTAHS HAWAIIAN

(Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)



HOMEWOOD SUITES

(Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

Williams Field Road, Suite 118, Gilbert in the San Tan Village mall. It sells artisan leather goods at what aims to be an affordable price. 602-661-8351. www.powrtandleathergoods.com

COMING SOON

11 Ted's Hot Dogs anticipated opening a location May 9 on the Chandler-Gilbert border at 2700 E. Germann Road, Chandler, in the Crossroads Towne Center, after this issue went to press. The Buffalo, New York-based chain grills hot dogs and other items and allows customers to choose their toppings. The only other location outside

• See **Moves** on page 9

BUSINESS MOVES

Moves

- From page 8

the Buffalo area has been in Tempe for more than 40 years. www.tedshotdogs.com

12 **Chrysalis Skin & Scar** anticipates opening May 16 at 3875 E. Williams Field Road, suite 105, Gilbert. Its services include scar revision and correction, lymphatic support and regenerative updates, men's hair, skin and body restoration, collagen-stimulating protocols, advanced laser therapy and regenerative skin and scar treatments. 480-881-6832. <https://chrysalisskinandscar.com>

13 **Homewood Suites by Hilton** is accepting bookings now for July 28 and after at 3623 S. Val Vista Drive, Gilbert. It will be a 130-room extended-stay property. The development includes 1,500 square feet of meeting space, an indoor/outdoor fitness center, an outdoor pool/spa, and apartment-style suites. 800-445-8667. www.hilton.com/en/hotels/phxmvmhw-homewood-suites-gilbert

14 Saint Mary Magdalene Catholic Church will add a coffee shop, **Magdala Coffee**, this fall on its campus at 2654 E. Williams Field Road, Gilbert. It is part of a larger project adding an indoor and outdoor gathering space consisting of the coffee shop, community gathering area and connected outdoor patio. The area will come through the repurposing and renovation of several offices, the staff

kitchen, a waiting area and two staff restrooms in the administration building. 480-279-6737. <https://smarymag.org>

15 **Perry's Steakhouse & Grille** anticipates opening a location June 8 at 1865 S. Santan Village Parkway in the Northside at SanTan Village development. The restaurant will accommodate up to 350 guests, have an open kitchen for diners to view chefs, a wine wall, a bar with island seating, outdoor dining options and four private dining rooms. The restaurant's roots are as a family butcher shop in Houston that added tables in 1986 and opened a restaurant in 1993. It now has 22 locations in eight states, and the Gilbert location is the first in Arizona. <https://perryssteakhouse.com>

16 **Safeway** anticipates opening at 3960 S. Val Vista Drive, Gilbert, in the coming Gilmore development. The 64,000-square-foot anchor development is anticipated to open in the fall. www.safeway.com

17 **Sandbox VR** will open its first permanent Arizona location May 15 at SanTan Village in Gilbert, located at 1835 S. San Tan Village Parkway. The venue offers group-based virtual reality experiences using full-body motion capture and haptic technology, featuring immersive games across science fiction, fantasy, horror and competitive genres. 602-584-2642. sandboxvr.com/gilbert

18 **Twisted Ribbon** anticipates opening in May at 2904 S. Santan Village

Parkway, Gilbert. It is a ribbon store that also sells wreaths, custom wreath ribbon bundles, wrapping paper and more. It is located in the former Twisted Sugar store. www.instagram.com/twistedribbon.az

NEW OWNERSHIP

19 ACES ABA purchased **Ally Pediatric Therapy** at 1519 S. Higley Road, Gilbert. The move expands access to

ABA services for families across the Phoenix metropolitan area. 480-297-0894. <https://allypediatric.com/locations/gilbert/>

20 **Tap Dragon** passed ownership to Jason Stuart on Jan. 26 at 835 S. Gilbert Road, suite 101, Gilbert. The tap room features local beer, mead and wine plus live music. 480-841-5566. <https://thetapdragon.com>



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SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

Gilbert Public Schools

Sixty of the district's high school students have been selected to perform in Arizona's 2026 all-state music ensembles.

Go to: tinyurl.com/msvp9s2z

Higley USD

The district will add preschool programs at Gateway Pointe, Higley Traditional Academy and San Tan Elementary in the fall.

Go to: tinyurl.com/yvt52vaa

Chandler USD

Aurora Archer, a Perry High School junior and author of a book, "Blood Moon Rising," was named the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Valley's 2026 Youth of the Year on March 7 after being selected from 10 finalists.

Go to: tinyurl.com/yt79myzy

Meetings

Gilbert Public Schools

6 p.m. May 12

6 p.m. June 9

140 S. Gilbert Road, Gilbert

480-497-3300

www.gilbertschools.net

Higley USD

5:30 p.m. May 5

5:30 p.m. June 2

2935 S. Recker Road, Gilbert

480-279-7000 • www.husd.org

Chandler USD

6:30 p.m. May 6

6:30 p.m. June 10

1525 W. Frye Road, Chandler

480-812-7000 • www.cusd80.org

Gilbert Public Schools seeks \$136M bond, Pioneer land sale on November ballot

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Gilbert Public Schools governing board has approved asking voters this November to OK a \$136 million bond and authorize the future sale of the former Pioneer Elementary School site.

District leaders argued the measures are necessary to help public school students compete on a more level financial playing field with charter schools and students using Empowerment Scholarship Accounts.

District officials told the governing board April 28 the bond would address aging facilities, campus security, technology infrastructure and transportation needs, while the land sale authorization would give the district flexibility to act quickly if a strong offer emerges for the closed Pioneer campus at 1535 N. Greenfield Road.

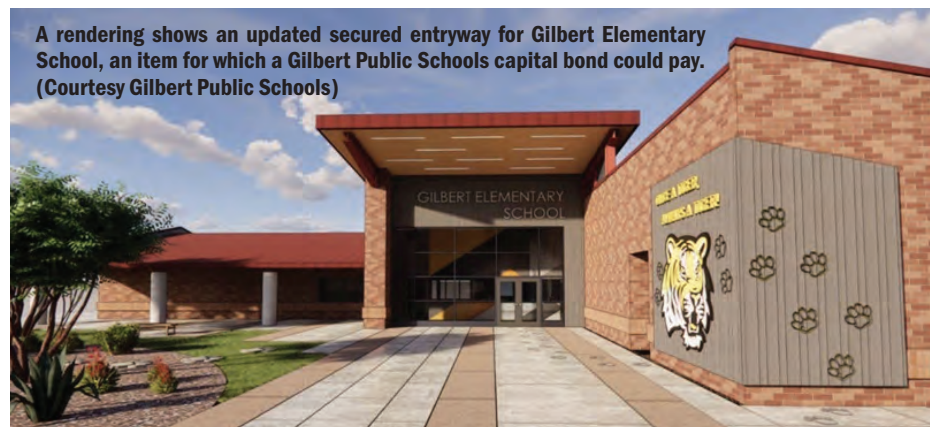
Associate Superintendent of Business and Support Operations Bonnie Betz said the broader issue is not simply deferred maintenance, but a long-standing gap in capital funding between traditional public school districts and other publicly funded education options.

"The conversation is really on looking for a level playing field for all public education students, whether being educated in a district, a charter school, or receiving an ESA," Betz said. "All students should receive the same capital funding."

She said Gilbert Public Schools receives less funding per student than charter schools and ESA students, even with the district's 15% maintenance and operations override in place.

For the current fiscal year, district officials said GPS receives \$271.72 less per elementary student and \$488.20 less per high school student compared with charter and ESA funding levels.

A rendering shows an updated secured entryway for Gilbert Elementary School, an item for which a Gilbert Public Schools capital bond could pay. (Courtesy Gilbert Public Schools)



During the seven years when the state reduced the statutory unrestricted capital formula for districts, Betz said GPS lost a cumulative \$73 million in capital funding.

"If Gilbert Public Schools had the capital funding available to them for each of our elementary and high school students, as our charter school students and ESA students, Gilbert Public Schools would have about \$50 million more a year, which would negate the need for a bond," she said.

Superintendent Shane McCord said the district is asking voters to approve the measure for the Nov. 3, 2026, election.

The proposal includes Proposition 422, the \$136 million bond request, and Proposition 423, authorization for a future sale of the Pioneer Elementary property.

The bond would be divided across five major categories, with the largest share — \$65 million — dedicated to critical facility upgrades and replacements such as roofs, HVAC systems, electrical systems and campus infrastructure.

Another \$33 million would go toward technology infrastructure, including a districtwide unified paging and notification system, upgraded campus networking equipment and classroom

technology refreshes.

The remaining funding would include \$20 million for career and technical education and extracurricular spaces, \$12 million for safety and security upgrades such as secure entryways and fencing, and \$6 million for buses, vans and transportation equipment.

Betz said the district's aging campuses make the investment increasingly urgent.

Gilbert Public Schools maintains nearly 4.8 million square feet of facilities with a replacement value of about \$1.8 billion. About 75% of that portfolio was built in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the average building age is now 32 years.

"If you had a house that was 32 years old, it was going to be that time in which components would start failing," Betz said.

The district's current deferred maintenance backlog stands at \$112.1 million, excluding Pioneer Elementary, which is closing. Officials said roofs account for nearly \$52 million of that need, while HVAC, plumbing and electrical systems make up another major share.

Recent failures have included major roof problems at South Valley Junior High and electrical distribution failures

• See **Bond** on page 11

Bond

• From page 10

at schools such as Ashland Ranch Elementary.

The district will look for some help from the state's School Facilities Board, but the board has significant limitations. The SFB has approximately \$250 million annually for about 100 districts statewide, creating intense competition for the funding.

"We have to try," Board member Jill Humpherys said, referencing the district's efforts to pursue additional help through SFB.

Humpherys also noted Arizona school districts have long struggled with inadequate capital funding.

"That is why the ASBA (Arizona School Boards Association) sued the state because of the lack of capital funding," she said. "They have not fully funded our capital needs for all districts for 20 years."

District leaders also pointed to their handling of enrollment declines and school closures as evidence they are trying to manage finances responsibly before asking taxpayers for new support.

Since fiscal year 2018, GPS has lost more than 4,000 students. The district has closed Houston Elementary, moved Neely Traditional Academy and sold the former Neely campus to the town of Gilbert. This year, the board also approved the closure of Pioneer Elementary.

Those actions, along with staffing adjustments, have produced more than \$20.3 million in ongoing staffing savings and \$4.4 million in avoided capital costs, according to district officials. The sale of the former Neely campus also generated \$6.85 million in school plant proceeds.

Betz said placing the Pioneer site sale on the ballot now would continue that long-term planning approach.

She said board member Blake Robison suggested being proactive and taking advantage of this election to put the

site sale on there. That would save the district the cost of another election.

Betz said voter approval would not require the district to sell the property.

"This request only allows GPS an opportunity to act quickly if an opportunity arises," she said.

District officials also said the bond could be structured with limited tax impact because previous 2015 and 2019 bond programs were built with relatively short debt schedules, giving the district flexibility.

Betz said that strategy allowed GPS to take advantage of historically low interest rates in 2021, reducing long-term taxpayer costs.

The district has a tax rate of just under 85 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

Even with the proposed \$136 million bond and three planned bond sales — \$50 million, \$50 million, and \$36 million — the tax rate will continue to decline over time, Betz said.

However, the bond resolution indicates this \$136 million bond ask will cost

taxpayers an additional 40 cents more than it would otherwise.

The estimated annual cost at the current rate of assessed value would be \$223.80 annually on a home with the median limited assessed value of \$263,600. That value is different than market value, Betz noted.

Board members asked questions about finding ways to avoid a bond, but eventually unanimously approved the resolutions.

"The fact is just that the school funding system's broken," Robison said. "It's a nonsensical system. It's not a conservative way of doing it. It's not a liberal way of doing it. It's not a moderate way of doing it. It's an inefficient way of doing it."

"This is the remedy that the state leaders tell us themselves, that you can go out for a bond. So I think it's interesting when they tell us the solution is to go out for a bond and then criticize us for going out for a bond."

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EDUCATION

Gilbert schools considering long Thanksgiving break

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Anyone waiting to schedule a fall 2027 vacation until Gilbert Public Schools releases its academic calendar will have to wait a little longer.

The governing board delayed approval of calendars for the 2027-28, 2028-29 and 2029-30 school years to consider whether taking Thanksgiving week off rather than two full weeks in October would be advantageous.

With the board poised to approve three years of calendars with the two-week fall break on April 28, Board Member Shana Murray asked the district to consider splitting fall break between a week in October and Thanksgiving week.

The proposed calendars presented to the board continued the district's current "2-2-2" structure — two weeks for fall break, two weeks for winter break and two weeks for spring break — which Superintendent Shane McCord said was strongly favored by families and staff through district surveys and community feedback.

"Based on the information that we've received from our community families as well as our staff, it was overwhelming in terms of the majority of people want to continue with the style of calendar we have, which is the 2-2-2," McCord said.

The 2027-28 proposal would begin school July 27, 2027, with fall break running Oct. 4-15. The 2028-29 calendar would start July 24, 2028, and the 2029-30 calendar would begin July 24, 2029. All three kept the district's traditional two-week October fall break.

Before the board discussion, a parent in public comment urged members not to approve the calendar as proposed, saying older students involved in sports and summer jobs lose too much time during summer break.



Students gather on the first day of school at Quartz Hill Elementary School. A proposal to take all of Thanksgiving week could slightly move the first day of school later by a couple days. (Courtesy Gilbert Public Schools)

"I'm here on behalf of a lot of my friends that we've gotten together as moms and as our kids are getting older and going to high school, summer jobs are a big thing, and I think that they need a little more time in the summer," she said.

She said the structure makes it difficult for families to use the two-week fall break because many high school athletes are still required to attend practices and events.

"When they take the two weeks off and sports are still going on, the kids are still required to be there for sports in high school," she said. "So it's like they might as well be in school anyway because we can't leave or do anything or really take a break."

Murray said she wanted the district to consider a calendar that keeps one week of fall break in October while shifting the second week to Thanksgiving, similar to a model recently adopted by Mesa Public Schools.

She said her concerns centered on attendance, academics and the length

of summer break. Murray did not ask the board to make the change Tuesday but to study it before making a final decision.

Murray said attendance during Thanksgiving week is often low, with many students missing the Monday and Tuesday before the holiday. She argued that using that week as an official break could reduce instructional disruption while shortening the long two-week October gap that can lead to learning loss.

"I started really paying attention to the benefit for the students," Murray said. "If our goal is academic growth, then we need to be looking at how do we maximize their time in the classroom."

She also said the district should consider the academic reset that follows long breaks.

"I just know how much work it takes when they're off for two weeks, getting them back into the groove of reteach for three to five days, reset your expectations, and then really get back into the

learning," said Murray, who teaches in Mesa Public Schools.

Board President Chad Thompson said he had independently looked into Mesa's reasoning and found similar concerns about low attendance during Thanksgiving week.

"The overwhelming reason was because of the attendance issues the week of Thanksgiving," Thompson said.

He also said he opposed pushing school deeper into July and wanted to protect more summer time for students and families.

"I'm a firm believer that kids need time in the summer to just be bored," Thompson said. "I think some of the greatest learning and growing opportunities come when kids are bored."

Board Member Jill Humpherys cautioned against changing course too quickly after the district had already surveyed the community and presented specific calendar options.

"We are a cruise ship," Humpherys said. "We are going full steam ahead. If we're going to make a change, it needs to be done thoughtfully, intentionally, and with due process so that the community voice can be heard."

She argued that approving a substantially different calendar without another survey could undermine trust with parents and staff who already participated in the district's process.

McCord agreed that if the district developed a new option, it should likely go back to the community for additional feedback, though he warned the board was running short on time with only 17 school days left in the year.

"I worry that we won't get the results in fast enough to be able to make prudent decisions," he said.

Assistant Superintendent Jason Martin, who has been in charge of putting together the calendar, also noted

• See **Break** on page 13

Break

• From page 12

that the current two-week fall break supports secondary intersession programs that serve 350 to 400 students during fall and spring breaks for grade enhancement, something that could be disrupted by moving to a one-week October break.

After extended discussion, the board tabled a final decision and instead

leaned toward delaying the broader decision while considering whether to approve only the 2027-28 calendar first or revisit the issue after further study and possible community input next school year.

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Target

• From page 4

Following that initial delay, the council revisited the case April 21 but again chose not to vote, instead continuing the item to allow additional work between the developer and nearby residents.

"This will give the applicant an opportunity to address comments, concerns, design, stipulations, all those kinds of things that are what you can work out during this time," Mayor Scott Anderson said.

He also encouraged continued dialogue between the applicant and the surrounding community as the project is refined.

The second continuance was approved unanimously, reflecting a desire among council members to see whether concerns raised during the public hearing can be

addressed before a final decision.

Opposition to the project has remained consistent throughout the process, with residents citing traffic, compatibility with nearby homes, parking overflow and the overall size of the proposed store. Some have also questioned whether another Target is needed in the area, pointing to existing locations nearby.

Project supporters, including town staff, have emphasized that the site has long been designated for commercial use and that the proposal largely aligns with existing development standards aside from the size of a single tenant.

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OPINION

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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.

Misinformation on utilities damaged Gilbert

As I heard the results of Gilbert's recent water audit for the first time, I found myself thinking about winners and losers.

Did the town "win" because the independent audit confirmed what we had said all along? That there were no systemwide inaccuracies, no widespread billing errors, and no evidence of a systemwide faulty metering system?

Did the council and staff earn the right to celebrate because the data validated our position? The answer is no.

No one won. We all lost.

Yes, the audit confirmed that Gilbert's water system is functioning as intended. It found no sys-

CORRECTION

The Legislative District 14 Republican Party has not endorsed a ticket of candidates for the district's seats in the Arizona Legislature. A story on page 18 of the April issue incorrectly reported it had endorsed three candidates.

Gilbert Public Schools considering weeklong Thanksgiving break

I think kids get way too much time off from school as it is and that's part of the reason why only one-third of them can do math and English at grade level. — **Larry B.**

Gilbert district leans toward 2-2-2 academic calendar for next three years

We had this schedule when we moved to Arizona from South Carolina. They called it

LETTERS

temic issues, no widespread inaccuracies in billing, and no evidence that residents were being incorrectly charged across the system.

In fact, the results reinforced that our infrastructure, while aging and in need of investment, is being measured and billed accurately.

But that truth comes at a cost.

The council lost. Our staff lost. And most importantly, our residents lost.

So who actually won?

The only winners were the social-media pundits who spent months fueling division with assumptions, accusations, half-truths — and in some cases, outright falsehoods.

They didn't follow facts — they curated them. They ignored information that didn't fit their narrative and amplified anything that did. That's not research. That's manipulation.

And it worked.

For months, they eroded trust in the town and its leadership. Whether intentional or not, the result was the same: fear, confusion, and anger.

Maybe the goal was always polit-

SPEAK UP

year-round school; our kids actually loved it. Losing three weeks of summer was not a huge deal to them as they were missing their larger group of friends. We also save tons on camp fees because as working parents we did not have nine weeks of vacation but could work in those long-spring, fall, and holiday breaks. — **Kristy B.**

Gilbert council to revisit controversial Target project

I am for the Target project being passed. The closest Targets are in Queen Creek and Mesa. Neither are in our tax base. We need business in the south Gilbert island that support our tax base. — **Judy M.**

Please send your comments to AzOpinions@iniusa.org.

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ical, maybe it was to create enough distrust, stir enough outrage, and convince residents to "vote them all out."

Maybe some of the loudest voices just happened to be tied to a potential council candidate and his friends.

Whatever the motivation, the impact is undeniable.

Between 4,500 and 6,000 residents stopped paying their utility bills, believing the system was broken. Now the audit is complete, and it proves the system wasn't broken at all.

The reality is, many of those residents likely didn't set that money aside. And now they're facing the consequences of a decision driven not by facts, but by misinformation.

That's the real damage.

And here's the question we have

• See **Letters** on page 15

We already have three Target stores within a few miles of that location. With the residential area, the Regional Park (and events) and commercial businesses there is already plenty of traffic without adding another big store. There should be another spot in Gilbert that is not so close in proximity to the current Target stores. — **Miriam W.**

We live in south Gilbert so this new one would be perfect for us. The Rittenhouse Target is Queen Creek (Gilbert gets no revenue from that one). The other locations are not convenient for us. — **Barb F.**

Let the market decide! — **Raul P.**

Absolutely no! — **Suzanne W.**

Letters

• From page 14

to ask: if utilities are eventually shut off for nonpayment, where will that frustration be directed? At the town — or at the people who convinced them not to pay in the first place?

This is not a good day for Gilbert.

Because even though the facts prevailed, deception had its moment. A coordinated wave of social media narratives succeeded in undermining trust in the very institutions that serve this community.

That's a loss for everyone.

But time has a way of correcting the record. In the years ahead, as residents see that the decisions made today were about protecting our long-term water supply and maintaining a reliable system, the truth will become clearer.

And when that happens, I hope our community becomes more cautious about who they trust—and more committed to facts over noise.

Because Gilbert deserves better than misinformation masquerading as truth.

Chuck Bongiovanni
Gilbert

Chuck Bongiovanni is vice mayor of Gilbert.

Winners did come from drama about water bills

According to AZCEND, “more Gilbert residents seek help as costs rise,” but Vice Mayor Chuck Bongiovanni states no one won in regard to water bills. Yet this very news outlet just did an article titled “Council OKs agricultural water rate pilot program.”

Gilbert Independent also reported “3% of the water meters in the town of Gilbert” were found to be supplying some form of false data. Those thousands of individuals I’m

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sure would disagree with the statement that “no one won” — they won. The small family farms won and the hundreds of residents of Gilbert who came forward at council meetings won because they can now believe changes may occur to ensure their bills are correct.

Yet, statements like this one, attacking a resident for ensuring accountability, once again proves that Mr. Bongiovanni just cannot — not — run off at the mouth in regard to town residents.

Dave Rosenfeld
Gilbert

Utilities rate hike may call for pause on town development

I am writing to the in response to two recent articles, February, 2026, “Why Gilbert utility bills rose and options are limited,” and “Utility rate hikes approved amid Colorado River risks,” published March 2026. Both pieces were authored by Tom Blodgett and published in the Gilbert Independent regarding the fiasco surrounding the towns water resources.

I, like many Gilbert residents, am appalled by the mandated increase in the water usage rates. There are numerous issues at play here, but the current town council seems intent on blaming previous administrations for not addressing this issue 10-plus years ago. Lack of foresight and intelligence is not a valid excuse sufficient to defer the blame.

There are, though, a number of

• See **Letters** on page 29

Be a Civility Advocate!



Civility Checklist

How to engage in respectful, honest & civil dialogue about public issues

- ☐ **Take the high road.** Respond to the topic — not the person. Refrain from demonizing others for their opinions. Assume those you disagree with are, like you, genuinely interested in improving the community.
- ☐ **Be respectful.** Bullying, public humiliation, insults, name-calling, harassment, and threats directed at another person — or that person's race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc. — have no place in civil discussions. Find ways to respectfully disagree without questioning someone's character or motives.
- ☐ **Be truthful.** Base your opinions/arguments on facts. Value honesty. Make only accurate statements when making your point and avoid exaggeration and stereotypes. When appropriate, cite your sources of information that others may question.
- ☐ **Don't misrepresent.** Always identify your opinions as opinions (not stating opinions as facts). Never misrepresent the views of others or falsely claim your opinions represent someone else. If quoting the words of others, identify and credit the source.
- ☐ **Listen & learn.** It's both polite and respectful to listen to those we disagree with (as well as those we support) and be genuine in our attempts to understand their point of view. Expand your mind by thoughtfully seeking out views that don't agree with your own.
- ☐ **Look for common ground.** When disagreeing with others, look for even small areas of agreement — which can be the gateway to working together for the greater good.
- ☐ **Respect privacy.** Keep private things private — whether it involves your own information or those with whom you disagree. Revealing private information about someone else is rude, unethical, potentially harmful and, in many cases, illegal.
- ☐ **Set a good example.** Practice civil behavior online as well as in public and in your interaction with others. Encourage others to practice these civil behaviors. And it's OK to challenge disrespectful behavior — but be courteous, respectful and helpful in your approach.



Now that you've read the checklist, take the Civility Pledge at yourvalley.net/civility-pledge.

SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS**MAY 15-JUNE 27****'The Wizard of Oz'**

Dorothy, Toto, and their friends Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion journey down the Yellow Brick Road to the magical Land of Oz as the classic 1939 MGM film is brought to life on stage with all the familiar music.

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MAY 25**Memorial Day ceremony**

The event, a collaboration between HD South, the town of Gilbert, the Veterans Advisory Board and American Legion Post 39, will include a flag and wreath ceremony, the battlefield cross, the POW/MIA table, and remarks from local Gilbert dignitaries, including Councilmember Monte Lyons.

The guest speakers for the event include Bank of America executive Kaz Misciawicz and Suffer City founder Jason France, both of whom served in the Marines.

8:30 a.m., free.

Civic Center Lawn, 50 E. Civic Center Drive, Gilbert.

480-926-1577. www.hd-south.org

• See **Highlights** on page 17

Skaters rally to remember Gilbert girl's love for hockey

By Pratham Valluri
CRONKITE NEWS

SCOTTSDALE — A dunk tank, a rack of signed NHL jerseys and hundreds of children rollerblading around the concourse at Salt River Fields while numerous others walked the baseball field below.

That scene greeted everyone who walked into the Arizona Diamondbacks spring training stadium last month for the sixth annual Skatin' for Leighton.

With 675 tickets sold, more than \$80,000 raised, and media coverage across the Valley, the courage of a 9-year-old girl continues to inspire the Valley more than five years after her death, and two years after the Coyotes' departure.

"When you have a kid that passes away that meant so much to the community, your biggest fear is that they're going to be forgotten, the light's going to fade, right?" Leighton Accardo's father, Jeremy, said. "It's stuff like this that keeps that light glowing even brighter so it's incredibly important to us as a family, and I think it's even more important to the girls."

Leighton Accardo died on Nov. 24, 2020, after an 18-month battle with cancer. To honor her, Valley native and former USA women's national hockey team member Lyndsey Fry skated 96 miles across the Valley in February 2021.

Alongside a community of youth hockey enthusiasts and Accardo's parents, Jeremy and Carly, Fry has continued to expand the event year after year, originally collaborating with the Arizona Coyotes and other organizations in the area.

When the Coyotes relocated to



Leighton Accardo, 9, died at the family's home in Gilbert on Nov. 24, 2020, following an 18-month battle with Stage 4 cancer. (Courtesy Arizona Coyotes)

Salt Lake City after the 2023-24 NHL season, there were concerns about the future of Skatin' for Leighton and girls youth hockey in Arizona.

"As soon as the team announced they were leaving, one of the first things (Carly) said to me was, 'What happens to Skatin' for Leighton?'" said Fry, who coached Leighton with the Arizona Kachinas youth hockey program. "I'm like, 'I promise you, we're gonna make it bigger and better. Just because the team's leaving, that's not going to change anything about the event.'"

Fry has kept her promise in the

years since, commending "an incredible committee of people" behind the scenes who hustled to bring in the highest number of sponsors the event has ever seen this year.

In addition to signed NHL jerseys featuring players such as Macklin Celebrini, Quinn Hughes, Jack Hughes, Auston Matthews and Alex Ovechkin, the event received donations from former Coyotes players Lawson Crouse, Dylan Guenther and Clayton Keller, now with the Utah Mammoth, and Josh Doan, now with the Buffalo Sabres.

• See **Skaters** on page 17

Skaters

• From page 16

Within Skatin' for Leighton, Fry has constantly added different activities, including a dunk tank and a bouncy slide. Fry also cut her hair and donated 10 inches of it to children in need.

All the funds raised at the event go toward the Leighton Accardo Memorial Fund, which "provides financial assistance to young girls with a passion for hockey."

"The fundraiser doesn't go to cancer research like a lot of fundraisers do, mostly because we wanted to make sure Leighton was remembered for what she loved, not what took her life," Fry said.

Before the celebration, the Kachinas, an all-girls hockey program based in Mesa that Fry co-founded, also had a year-end gathering. Matt Shott, the other co-founder of the

club, faced a similar battle with cancer and died in 2021.

The Matt Shott Arizona Hockey Legacy Foundation, established in his honor, also had a booth at the event, with its goal to "support hockey programming and the growth of the sport in Arizona."

This is the second consecutive year that Skatin' for Leighton has taken place at Salt River Fields, after the Coyotes held the event at Mountain America Stadium in 2024. With ASU hockey now the biggest hockey program in the Valley, Sun Devils players Logan Morrell, Lincoln Kuehne and Ben Kevan also took part in the event.

Morrell's connection with the Accardos harkens back to his childhood, where he skated in Gilbert as a teenager. The Accardos live in Gilbert.

Seeing the community of young girls come together to celebrate Leighton evoked personal connections, with Kevan and Morrell re-

ferring to their younger sisters, who played hockey.

"I'd say 20 years ago, honestly, there would probably be nothing like this," Kuehne said. "Even with the Coyotes gone, you can see the game's grown."

"With the PWHL (Professional Women's Hockey League), it's really growing at a fast rate," Kevan added.

As the Valley's tightly knit community celebrated Leighton's story – one that no hockey fan in Arizona will ever forget – Carly Accardo emphasized the event's impact on girls youth hockey.

"There are a lot of girls that need financial assistance," she said. "We don't want that to be the reason why a girl can't play hockey."

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Highlights

• From page 16

JUNE 5

H2O Fest

This family-friendly water festival presented by J2 Design features water obstacles, an 8-lane outdoor pool, water slides, water activities, and more. Participants are encouraged to wear swim shoes, bathing suits or clothing that can get wet. Tickets required.

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Gilbert Sister Cities selects 2026 youth ambassadors

Independent Newsmedia

Gilbert Sister Cities has selected six high school juniors to serve as 2026 youth ambassadors following a four-month application and interview process.

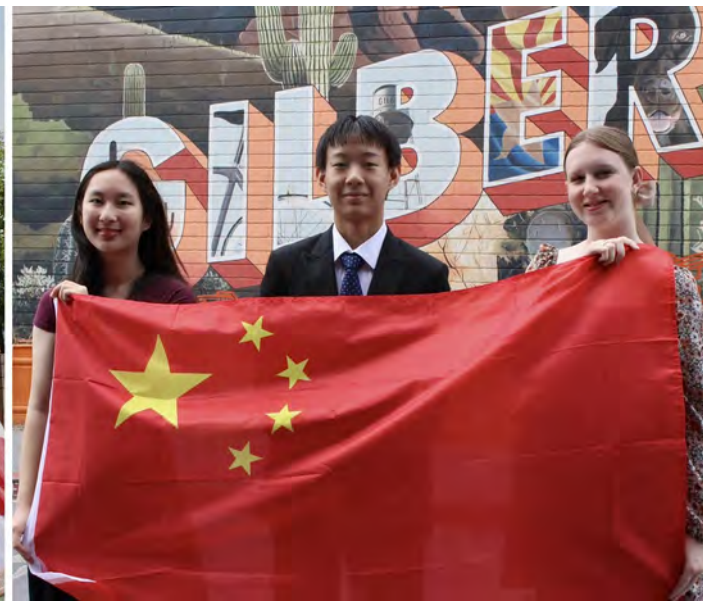
The students will participate in an international exchange program with sister cities in Northern Ireland and China during the summer.

Three of the ambassadors will travel in June to Antrim-Newtownabbey, Northern Ireland, where they will stay with host families before returning to Gilbert to host visiting students in July. The remaining three will travel in July to Leshan, China, following the same exchange format.

The students selected for Northern Ireland are Maya Dykman, Mackenzie Redford and Allie Thivierge. The students selected for China are Amelia Bray, Eurah Kim and Michael Wang.

The youth ambassador program is designed to promote cultural exchange and international understanding through student immersion in daily life, schools and community activities in Gilbert's sister cities.

All six students are active in ac-



Gilbert Sister Cities will send youth ambassadors, from left, Maya Dykman, Allie Thivierge and Mackenzie Redford to Northern Ireland and Eurah Kim, Michael Wang and Amelia Bray to China. (Courtesy Gilbert Sister Cities)

ademics, athletics, student government and community service at their respective schools, which include Gilbert High School, Gilbert Classical Academy, Desert Ridge High School and Benjamin Franklin High School.

Before traveling, the students took part in the Gilbert Global Village Festival in April.

After returning, they will share

their experiences through community events and school visits and assist with mentoring future program applicants.

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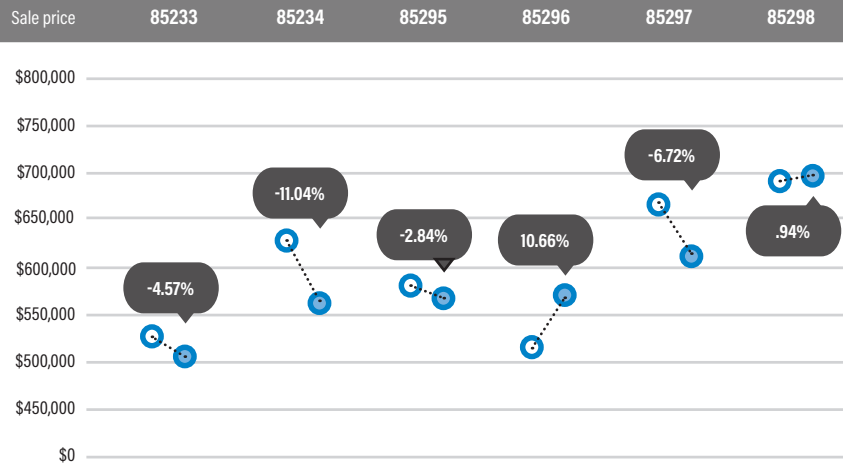
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**NUMBER OF HOMES ON THE MARKET**

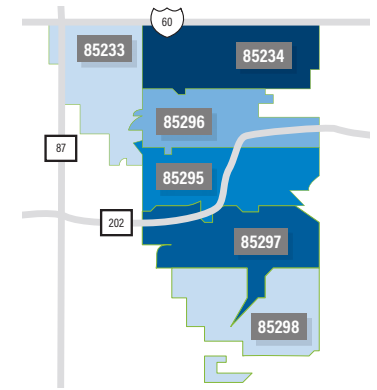
	MAR 2025	MAR 2026
85233	111	89
85234	117	98
85295	122	130
85296	128	142
85297	111	106
85298	194	188

**AVERAGE DAYS ON THE MARKET**

	MAR 2025	MAR 2026
85233	56	72
85234	55	53
85295	71	61
85296	74	71
85297	61	54
85298	71	69

**NUMBER OF HOMES UNDER CONTRACT**

	MAR 2026	MAR 2026
85233	51	57
85234	49	66
85295	66	64
85296	67	75
85297	38	41
85298	80	68



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CD5 candidates debate economy, immigration, water



Democrat Brian Hualde, left, makes introductory remarks at a Congressional District 5 candidate forum while, from left, Democrat Chris James, moderator Patrick Carlson from APS, Republican Daniel Keenan and Democrat Elizabeth Lee listen. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Four candidates seeking to represent Arizona's Congressional District 5 offered sharply different visions on immigration, health care, regulation and the federal government's role in the economy during a candidate forum Wednesday hosted by the Chandler, Gilbert and Queen Creek chambers of commerce.

The May 6 event at the DoubleTree by Hilton Phoenix/Gilbert Conference Center featured Republican Daniel Keenan and Democrats Brian Hualde, Chris James and Elizabeth Lee. Republican Mark Lamb did not attend, citing a scheduling conflict.

The discussion frequently centered on the government's role in supporting East Valley businesses and residents, with candidates offering contrasting approaches ranging from reduced regulation and spending cuts to expanded infrastructure investment and health care reforms.

Keenan, a homebuilder and conservative Republican, repeatedly argued for reducing the size and influence of the federal government.

"I want less government in our lives, everyone, so we could be free and prosperous," Keenan said during closing remarks.

He emphasized lowering regulations, ending deficit spending and

tightening immigration enforcement, while also calling for the elimination of the H-1B visa program.

"I want those jobs to come to young Americans," Keenan said.

Keenan also tied affordability concerns to his work in construction, describing one of the first homes he built for a veteran and a nurse with three children.

"One of the things that motivates me to run is the fact that there's no way that that family could afford to purchase that same house today," he said.

James, who highlighted his background in small business development and work with the federal government, focused on economic development, access to capital and bipartisan cooperation.

"We need people who, and we need leaders who can help heal, can help bring hope, can help bring solutions for our communities," James said.

James said the federal government should act as a partner to local economies and criticized what he described as partisan gridlock in Washington. He also defended programs supporting small businesses, arguing federal cuts to agencies such as the Small Business Administration reduce resources available to local companies.

When discussing immigration, James supported stronger border secu-

• See **CD5** on page 21

CD5

• From page 20

erty while also advocating pathways for longtime undocumented immigrants to gain legal status.

“We need to figure out that in the 1980s, President Reagan figured out a solution, and we need to look at that solution,” James said.

Lee, a reproductive health and infertility nurse and patient advocate, frequently framed issues through the lens of health care and systems management.

“The working folks of our district have not had representation that looked first and foremost to what was in their best interest,” Lee said in her opening remarks.

Lee argued the federal government should support workforce development and affordable career pathways outside traditional four-year universities. She also repeatedly returned to

healthcare costs as a major economic burden on families and employers.

“The cost of health care in this country is atrocious, and that burden falls on patients and it falls on businesses,” Lee said.

On immigration, Lee criticized conditions in ICE detention facilities and called for more humane treatment and expanded pathways to citizenship.

“They are here, they are human, we need to handle the problem in a humane way,” Lee said.

Hualde, an Army combat medic veteran and pediatric surgery nurse practitioner, emphasized infrastructure, education and healthcare access throughout the forum.

“What I’ve done my entire life is to serve,” Hualde said during his opening statement.

Hualde argued federal investment in infrastructure is essential for the rapidly growing East Valley, particularly transportation systems that connect workers to businesses.

“If we don’t have the appropriate infrastructure in place to make sure their businesses can be successful, they will fail,” he said.

Like the other Democratic candidates, Hualde supported stronger border security paired with legal pathways for immigrants to work in the United States.

“Not everyone is here for bad purposes,” Hualde said.

The candidates also sparred over taxation and the national debt.

Keenan argued deficit spending was the primary driver of the nation’s debt and rejected calls for higher taxes on wealthy Americans.

“The rich pay their fair share,” Keenan said.

Hualde and James both supported closing tax loopholes and increasing taxes on wealthier Americans and corporations. Hualde also called for reducing military spending, while James said corporations with sophisticated tax strategies often avoid paying taxes

entirely.

Water policy emerged as another major topic, with all four candidates acknowledging Arizona’s long-term challenges surrounding the Colorado River and continued growth in the state.

Keenan advocated for additional desalination plants and expanded nuclear energy production, while James called for regional cooperation among Western states, tribes and agricultural interests.

Lee said Arizona should become a leader in sustainability and long-term planning, warning against “borrow(ing) from our kids’ future for today.”

Hualde focused on regulating major water users such as artificial intelligence data centers and balancing future growth with limited resources.

The event concluded with candidates making final appeals to voters ahead of the race for the East Valley-based congressional seat.



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Arizona LD14 candidates outline priorities at East Valley forum

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Candidates for Arizona Legislative District 14 outlined differing approaches to immigration, water policy, transportation and state budgeting during a May 6 candidate forum hosted by the chambers of commerce of Chandler, Gilbert and Queen Creek.

The event at the DoubleTree by Hilton Phoenix/Gilbert Conference Center featured Republican candidates Tyler Ellsworth and Laurin Hendrix and Democratic candidates Stephanie Walsh and Mary Rose. Republicans Mylie Biggs and Jedidah Lyons did not attend. Biggs and Walsh are running for the Arizona Senate seat, while the others are seeking House seats.

Walsh, a mechanical engineer and nonprofit founder, said she en-



A Legislative District 14 candidates forum featured, from left, Democrat Stephanie Walsh, Republican Tyler Farnsworth, moderator so and so, Democrat Mary Rose and Republican Laurin Hendrix. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

tered the race because Arizona faces major long-term challenges tied to energy and water.

"We have big challenges coming

up," Walsh said. "Energy and water, again, are my biggest expertise areas."

Ellsworth, a Gilbert business

owner, focused heavily on economic growth and reducing government bureaucracy.

"I want less politicians down in Phoenix and more individuals that know how to run a business," Ellsworth said.

Rose, a former business operations manager, said she decided to run after becoming frustrated with the political climate.

"I decided that instead of pulling over and not being happy with things, that I would push that into something more positive and run for office," Rose said.

Hendrix, the incumbent legislator in the race, emphasized experience in government and budgeting.

"The biggest thing the legislature does is you balance a budget," Hendrix said.

• See LD14 on page 23

LD14

• From page 22

Candidates generally agreed the state should avoid overregulating local communities while still supporting infrastructure and economic development.

Ellsworth called for streamlining permitting and approval processes for businesses, arguing delays slow economic growth.

"As a small business owner, too often we have no idea what's going on to getting our permits and our approvals done," he said.

Rose said municipalities should retain more local control and be able to move projects forward more quickly.

"For the most part, the state needs to stay out of the town business," Hendrix added.

Budgeting became a recurring theme throughout the evening, with several candidates criticizing how long lawmakers take to pass spending plans each year.

"I think our budgeting process has gotten out of control," Walsh said.

Hendrix said the Legislature's inability to pass budgets quickly is one of the state's biggest structural problems.

"There ought to be a constitutional timeline or statutory timeline to require the legislature to get it done," he said.

Transportation and infrastructure also drew significant discussion.

Ellsworth praised Arizona's highway system compared with other states but criticized light rail expansion.

"I did not like the light rail then," he said. "I do not like the light rail now."

Walsh argued Arizona should improve how road projects are managed, saying long construction timelines create economic costs for driv-

ers and businesses.

"It is frustrating to watch highways be worked on for years and you never see workers on them," she said.

On immigration, candidates offered some of their clearest differences.

Walsh said Arizona relies heavily on immigrant labor and should pursue humane policies while maintaining border security.

"We build a lot of stuff on labor that is imported and expensive and they work hard," Walsh said.

Ellsworth stressed the importance of enforcing immigration laws while prioritizing American workers.

"We also need to enforce the law," he said.

Rose called for making citizenship easier for immigrants already contributing to Arizona's economy.

"These are people," Rose said.

Hendrix argued the immigration debate often overlooks the role of legal cross-border workers and skilled professionals.

"Immigration is happening," Hendrix said. "Legal immigration is happening and needs to continue."

Water policy rounded out much of the discussion, with candidates debating the severity of Arizona's future shortages.

Walsh warned Arizona communities likely will face reduced Colorado River supplies as the population grows.

"We are going to be having less water," she said.

Rose emphasized conservation and public education, while Hendrix downplayed fears of an immediate crisis.

"Brush your teeth, use your water, don't worry about it," Hendrix said.

We would like to invite our readers to submit their civil comments, pro or con, on this issue. Email AZOpinions@iniusa.org. Tom Blodgett can be reached by email at tblodgett@iniusa.org or follow him @sp_blodgett on X.

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Hale Centre Theatre announces 2026-27 season

Independent Newsmedia

Hale Centre Theatre Arizona announced its 2026-27 season, which will run from August 2026 through early 2027 at the Gilbert venue.

The season is scheduled to open Aug. 21 with “Catch Me If You Can,” a musical adapted from the 2002 film about con artist Frank Abagnale Jr. The production is slated to run through Oct. 3.

“Annie,” the musical centered on a young orphan whose life changes after being taken in by billionaire Oliver Warbucks, is scheduled to follow from Oct. 9 through Nov. 21.

The theater’s annual holiday production, “A Christmas Carol,” will return from Nov. 27 through Dec. 26. The musical adaptation marks its 24th year being staged in Gilbert.

“Clue,” a stage comedy based on the board game, is scheduled to open Dec. 31 and run through Feb. 6. The play follows a group of guests attempting to solve a murder at a dinner party during a stormy night.

The season also includes “Nunsense,” a musical comedy about members of a convent who organize a fundraiser following an accidental poisoning. The production is scheduled to run on Mondays and Tuesdays from Jan. 19 through March 23.

“Oklahoma!” will follow from Feb. 11 through March 27. The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical centers on the rivalry between farmers and cowboys in a turn-of-

the-century territory, focusing on the relationship between Curly and Laurey.

“Damn Yankees,” a musical adaptation of the Faust legend set in the world of professional baseball, is scheduled to run from April 2 through May 8, 2027. The story follows a frustrated fan who trades his soul for a chance to defeat the New York Yankees.

One additional family-oriented musical has not yet been announced. The production is expected to be revealed Jan. 14, 2027, with performances running from May 14 through July 3, 2027.

The season will conclude with “Bright Star,” a musical inspired by a true story and set in the American South of the 1920s and 1940s. The production is scheduled to run from July 9 through Aug. 14, 2027.

Season tickets are scheduled to go on sale at 6 a.m. May 11. Individual tickets are set to be available beginning June 8. Tickets may be purchased through the Hale Centre Theatre box office at 480-497-1181 or through the theater’s website.

Hale Centre Theatre Arizona is located at 50 W. Page Ave. in downtown Gilbert and stages year-round productions. Additional information about tickets and performance schedules is available through the theater.

*We would like to invite our readers to submit their civil comments, pro or con, on this issue.
Email AZOpinions@iniusa.org.*

Higley approves final FY2026 budget revision

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Higley Unified School District approved its second and final budget revision for fiscal year 2025-26 May 5, adjusting projected revenues and expenditures to reflect updated enrollment figures, reduced one-time state funding and the ongoing financial effects of the district's failed override renewal.

The revision, approved unanimously by the governing board, updates the district's financial plan using 100th-day enrollment figures and the latest state funding estimates before the district approves its fiscal year 2026-27 budget next month.

The revision takes the maintenance and operations budget from \$118.87 million to \$118.86 million, less than 0.01% difference, and the capital budget from \$18.51 million to \$18.49 million, a drop of 0.1%.

Chief Financial Officer Sharon Rushcamp said the district's average daily membership, a key enrollment-based figure used in the state's education funding formula, declined by 22.48 students compared with the first revision approved in December, bringing total ADM to 11,672.43 students.

That adjustment, combined with changes to one-time state supplements, lowered Higley's maintenance and operations budget limit by about \$11,000 from the December revision to roughly \$118.86 million.

Rushcamp said the district also continues to feel the effects of the override phase-down that began this fiscal year after voters rejected renewal of the district's maintenance and operations override.

"We had started at about \$14.1 mil-



Sharon Rushcamp

lion," Rushcamp said of the override phase-down. "This year we're at about \$9.3 million."

The override reduction lowered the district's maintenance and operations budget by about \$4.85 million for fiscal year 2026, according to the district presentation.

The revised budget also accounted for updated one-time state funding. Higley expects to receive about \$150,474 in free and reduced-price lunch Group B weight supplemental funding and approximately \$319,666 in one-time district additional assistance funding.

In the capital budget, the district's overall spending limit decreased by about \$18,500 from the December revision to approximately \$18.49 million.

Rushcamp said the district placed the Proposition 123 funding into capital funds to help address upcoming facility and equipment needs.

"We are placing the Prop. 123 this year in capital just to meet some upcoming capital needs that we'll have with explicit options and repairs to facilities and such," she said.

Board members largely praised the district's budgeting accuracy and financial management during the discussion.

Vice President Sara Jarman said she appreciated how closely the district's revised numbers matched earlier projections.

The revision marked the final budget adjustment for the current fiscal year. Higley administrators are scheduled to present the proposed fiscal year 2026-27 budget June 2, with formal adoption planned for June 23.



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Maricopa Community Colleges to graduate more than 18,000 in May

Independent Newsmedia

The Maricopa Community Colleges are preparing to confer more than 18,400 degrees and certificates across its 10 colleges, including approximately 350 bachelor's degrees from eight programs, in May.

"The commencement season is filled with joy and excitement, as we celebrate the culmination of our students' academic achievements," said Dr. Steven R. Gonzales, Maricopa Community Colleges chancellor, in a release. "As I prepare for my final commencement season, I'm reminded of the sheer impact of our system, as students prepare to lead, serve, and innovate throughout Arizona."

More than 90% of the class of 2026 are Arizona residents. They will step into roles such as nurses, teachers, skilled trades professionals and advanced manufacturing technicians,

among many others.

Annually, the 10-college system enrolls more than 145,000 students and is the largest provider of higher education for state residents.

Here's how this year's graduates will close workforce gaps in Arizona:

- General Transfer Certificate and Degrees: More than 3,300 students will continue their academic endeavors at one of the system's transfer partners.

- Applied Technology: More than 800 graduates will have the skills needed for roles that include automotive repair, CNC machining, and aircraft maintenance.

- Behavioral Sciences and Human Services: More than 2,400 graduates will have the training to serve communities as counselors, firefighters, law enforcement, paralegals, and social workers.

- Business, Entrepreneurialism, and

Management: More than 2,400 students are on a pathway to careers in accounting, hospitality, management, marketing, and entrepreneurialism.

- Computer and Information Technology: Nearly 1,000 graduates are skilled in areas such as cybersecurity, data analytics, and video game production.

- Culture and Society: Nearly 350 students will use their skills in anthropology, creative writing, economics, and journalism to shape the world around them.

- Education: More than 400 graduates are now prepared to teach the next generation of students in areas like elementary, special, and secondary education.

- Health Sciences: Nearly 3,000 graduates will provide compassionate care in health-related fields such as dental hygiene, nursing, paramedicine,

phlebotomy, and respiratory care.

- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics: More than 560 students gained skills in STEM-related pathways like Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, engineering, mortuary science, sustainable horticulture, and veterinary.

- Visual and Performing Arts: Nearly 390 graduates will pursue their love of the arts as actors, artists, designers, and musicians.

For the fourth consecutive fiscal year, tuition will remain unchanged across its 10 colleges. Students pay \$97 per credit hour for lower-division courses and \$145.50 per credit hour for upper-division classes.

For the majority of Maricopa Community Colleges students, 93% graduate and enter the job market debt-free thanks to grants, scholarships, and free and low-cost textbooks.



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before moving to Minnesota. She said returning to Arizona has long been part of her career trajectory.

"I've always thought that at some point in my career, I'd be back in Arizona," she said.

She described Gilbert as a high-performing organization facing a complex transition, combining strong fundamentals with mounting fiscal and development pressures.

"It's a very unique opportunity in a very high-performing organization," Zelms said.

Her experience includes navigating economic downturns and major crises, including the Great Recession and the Yarnell Hill Fire, which she said shaped her approach to leadership and resilience.

Zelms said she is familiar with the types of challenges Gilbert faces, par-

ticularly as it shifts from rapid growth to long-term sustainability.

"There's not a silver bullet for the problem," she said.

She emphasized the need for deliberate decision-making as the town moves into its next phase.

"It's going to require a lot of intentionality and probably a very different mindset," Zelms said.

If selected, she said her initial focus would center on building relationships across the organization and community while also addressing the town's long-term financial plan.

"The first maybe 60 days is meeting with a lot of people," she said.

At the same time, she said the town's fiscal outlook would require immediate attention.

"That fiscal plan for the structural integrity" would remain at the top of the list, she said.

The next town manager will step into the role at a critical juncture for Gilbert.

The town is facing a projected structural budget gap of roughly \$20 million, alongside constraints on state revenue options and increasing costs tied to maintaining infrastructure built during decades of rapid growth.

As Gilbert nears buildout, the focus is shifting toward redevelopment, economic diversification and sustaining the quality of life that has defined the community's growth.

Despite their different backgrounds, both finalists identified similar priori-

ties: addressing the town's long-term financial stability, strengthening economic development strategies and planning for the reinvestment needed to maintain aging infrastructure.

Council is expected to continue its selection process in the coming weeks, with a final decision anticipated after additional deliberation.

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Hammer

• From page 1

he barely remembers firsthand. But it set the tone for everything that followed — a life shaped not by limitation, but by expectation.

That expectation carried Hammer from a multisport childhood in Michigan to collegiate All-American honors, to four Paralympic Games and, most recently, to a gold medal in paratriathlon.

Now living in Gilbert, the 40-year-old father of two is still chasing performance gains, still building a life around sport and family, and still guided by the same principle: do the work, no matter the circumstance.

A foundation built early

Hammer's upbringing left little room for excuses.

"I have no excuses not to do anything that anyone else could do and not to do it well," he said.

That mindset wasn't accidental. It reflected the environment around him — a working-class culture where effort was expected and complaints carried little weight.

"You don't really complain about things, you just go to work and whatever hand you're dealt, no pun intended ... you deal with it and you make the most out of it," Hammer said.

Sports became a natural outlet. Hockey, baseball, golf — Hammer tried them all, adapting as needed but never being told he couldn't participate.

"It was like, you want to do this sport, we'll figure out how," he said.

Outworking the field

Running came later, almost by accident, when a friend pulled him into middle-school track. What Hammer lacked in early speed, he made up for with effort.

That difference became clear when he began surpassing teammates.

"He's running faster than you be-



Chris Hammer poses with a fan at a Valley Toyota Dealers booth at AZ Boardwalk in Scottsdale. (Courtesy Valley Toyota Dealers)

cause he's working harder than you," Hammer recalled a coach telling his friend. "He's working harder than you, probably because he always had to work harder than you."

The results followed. At Grand Valley State, Hammer became a five-time All-American and earned a spot on the U.S. Paralympic track and field team — even though he wasn't initially sure he belonged.

"I didn't even know what parasport was at the time," he said.

A humbling experience at the London Paralympics reshaped his understanding of the movement.

"I realized the parasports isn't about celebrating what you don't have," Hammer said. "It's about celebrating the things that you do have."

Reinvention through triathlon

Injuries eventually caught up with him as a runner. High mileage and an uneven gait made it difficult to stay healthy, forcing a decision about what came next.

The answer came unexpectedly — in an airport, after a White House trip honoring Olympians and Paralympians.

Hammer saw that triathlon would

debut in the next Paralympics and reached out to USA Triathlon despite having no background in swimming or cycling.

"I don't know how to swim, but I'm kind of interested," he said he wrote.

It was a leap into the unknown, but one that paid off.

Hammer has since collected 14 World Triathlon Para Series medals, multiple world championship podium finishes and, after near misses in Rio and Tokyo, a gold medal in Paris.

He did it at an age when many athletes are winding down.

"I was 38 years old," he said. "I was the oldest person who was in serious contention for the podium."

A calculated gamble in Gilbert

After Tokyo, Hammer recognized he had plateaued. To break through, he made a bold move — relocating his family from West Virginia to Arizona to train full time with USA Triathlon's Project Podium group.

"If you always do what you always did, you'll always get what you always got," he said.

The move required sacrifice. His wife left a job she loved, and his children, now 8 and 11, adjusted to a new

life.

In Gilbert, Hammer has found both opportunity and balance. He trains at an elite level while working part-time at Arizona State University, where he uses his doctorate in sports psychology to help others improve performance.

"I'm passionate about human performance and people trying to be the best versions of themselves that they can be," he said.

Still chasing the next finish line

Hammer's focus now is on extending his career to the 2028 Paralympics in Los Angeles.

"If the games came around, and I wasn't a part of them, I would regret that," he said.

At the same time, he's mindful of the bigger picture — balancing training with family life and preparing for what comes after competition.

"I need to start thinking about my future," he said.

For now, that means taking things one season at a time, continuing to compete at the highest level while he can.

More than a medal

Hammer's message isn't framed around disability. In fact, it's a word he rarely used growing up.

Instead, he focuses on access and possibility — making sure others know they can pursue the same paths.

It's the same lesson his parents taught him years ago, standing firm over something as simple as a pair of shoes.

"I just want people to pursue an active, healthy lifestyle and to not feel like they're limited by anything," he said. "There's always ways to adapt and overcome."

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Letters

• From page 15

issues, i.e., Colorado River cuts and operating guidelines, cost of existing infrastructure, rising water resource costs, major infrastructure and higher operation costs, that were presented by the town council in an effort to mitigate the punitive increases passed by the seven members.

Also presented was a discussion on how utility operations were funded, and in particular, “not barred by law, but bound by financial policies, bond covenants and fiscal responsibility practices discourage using unrelated funds as regular subsidies for utility operations.”

I believe laws were passed for the benefit of the public, but upon review may need to be changed. While I don’t claim to know all of

the accounting requirements for the town, perhaps the funding could come through a tax levy or property tax to homeowners and businesses. The potential advantage to a resident is that at minimum it could potentially be tax deductible.

Additionally, how will voters react when a ballot initiative is presented for additional tax increases for major infrastructure investments, fire, police, education, that will require voter approval? My apprehension is that given the excessive costs of water usage that it will be challenging at best to pass future initiatives.

My most alarming concern, though, are the potential reductions in Arizona’s water access from the Colorado River. The article states a potential reduction in 2026 from roughly 40% to 17%, a deficit of over 110%. You don’t have to be a meteorologist to recognize that both Colorado and Arizona were

significantly impacted this year by a reduction in snowfall amounts. There will be, substantial decreases in the amount of water flowing on the Colorado River this year.

It is difficult today to drive anywhere in the southeast Valley, and Gilbert in particular, without the inconvenience of road closures and detours to accommodate the explosive construction of new homes, warehouses, condominiums, apartments and commercial spaces.

While the town council has messaged to current residents the need for conservation, the unpaced and unfettered development seems egregious at best, and reckless at worst. Why isn’t there a current discussion on the table to place a temporary moratorium of six months, a year, or longer on new development? If the impending issue is truly the reduction in the resource we will receive, how does this unrestrained development help

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us resolve the most critical component of the controversy?

I have always subscribed to the belief that a “rising tide does lift all boats” and in general, increased expansion is beneficial to all. This, however, appears to be a warranted justification for a pause on new development.

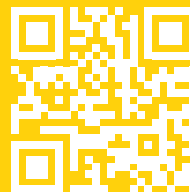
I have enjoyed living in Gilbert and moved here because of the amenities and cost of living. For those considering Gilbert now, though, perhaps other communities will be more attractive.

**Jake Kilrain
Gilbert**

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Budget

• From page 1

duce ongoing annual revenue by about \$20 million.

Because those revenues primarily support the general fund — which pays for police, fire and parks — the impact is concentrated on core services.

“Police, fire, parks and recreation are the largest,” Pfof said. “So they receive the largest amount of impact when we lose \$20 million.”

Most requests left on table

Departments submitted about \$81 million in general fund requests for the upcoming year, but only about \$16 million — roughly 20% — is included in the recommended budget.

Across all funds, about \$40 million in spending is proposed, with most aimed at maintaining existing service levels rather than expanding them.

Pfof made clear the unfunded items are not optional.

“These items are not just nice to have,” she said. “There’s all needs here.”

Those needs include additional police, fire and parks staffing, along with vehicles, equipment, facility maintenance and technology upgrades.

Staffing represents one of the largest gaps in the proposed budget.

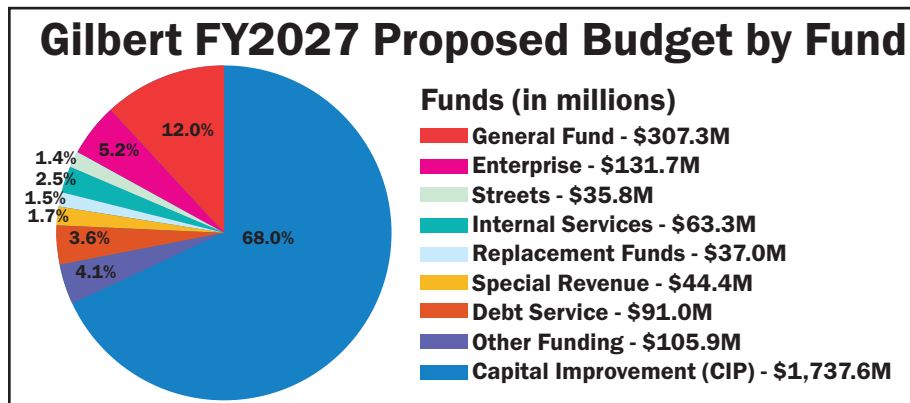
About 300 positions were requested across the organization, but the plan funds roughly 58 full-time positions and 43 limited-term roles, leaving about 200 positions unfunded. Meeting all those needs would require about \$35 million in additional funding.

“Gilbert is the leanest workforce in the Valley,” Pfof said.

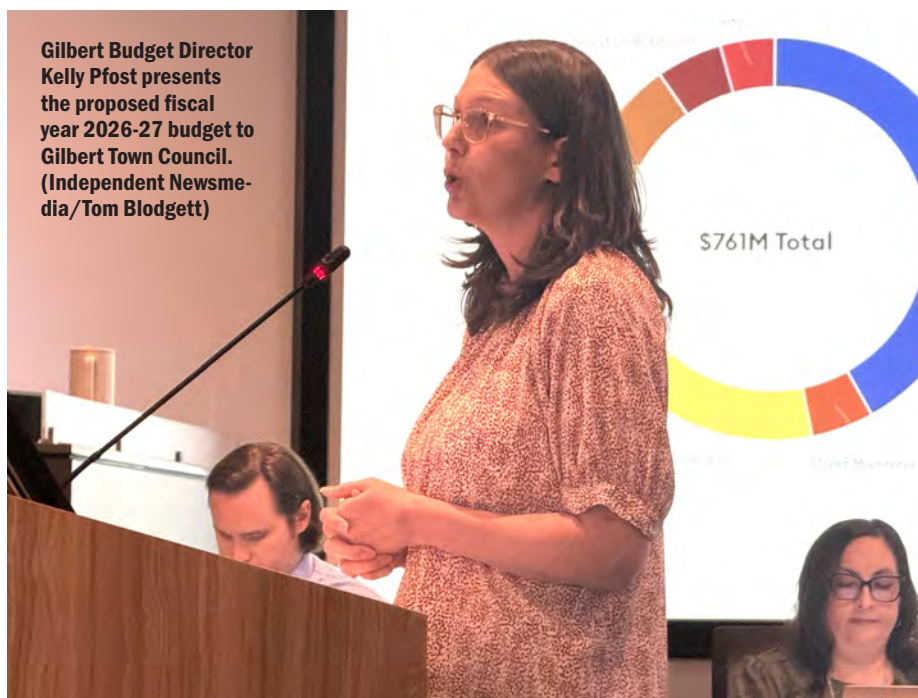
Despite continued population growth and service demands, the proposed budget does little to change that standing, with the town continuing to operate with the lowest staffing levels per capita in the region.

Closing the gap

To balance the budget, the town re-



A pie chart shows the breakdown of Gilbert's proposed budget for fiscal year 2026-27 by category. (Source: Town of Gilbert/Independent Newsmedia)



duced base spending by about \$2 million and identified additional savings and one-time funding sources.

Residents may see changes in services as a result, including the elimination of events such as Movies in the Park fall series, the KAPOW! Superhero Adventure Run for children and the outdoor expo, reduced park maintenance and pest control, and operational changes in police and fire services.

The town is also using one-time money, including proceeds from a Heritage District land sale, and shifting funds within existing projects to cover short-term needs.

“We really wanted to maintain service levels for our citizens and have the least impact as possible,” Pfof said.

Capital plan drives increase

A significant portion of the overall budget increase is tied to Gilbert’s capital improvement program, which totals about \$1.7 billion for fiscal 2027.

Pfof said those numbers can appear unusually large because of how the town budgets for infrastructure projects.

“We do fund the full amount of the project upfront,” she said. “What you’ll see in the budget is not just new proj-

ects that we’re working on, but it’s projects that we are working on ... that are not finished, and we carry that money forward.”

About \$1.2 billion of that total reflects projects already underway and continuing into the next fiscal year, with roughly \$500 million in new projects added.

Major investment areas include water systems, parks and recreation, and street improvements, with continued work on projects such as Gilbert Regional Park Phase 2, Desert Sky Park Phase 2 and the North Water Treatment Plant expansion.

Overall, the proposed budget prioritizes maintaining existing service levels, protecting employees and supporting economic development, rather than expanding services.

Only about 36% of requested funding across all funds is included in the plan, underscoring the limited capacity for new investments.

Property tax rate unchanged

Gilbert will maintain its secondary property tax rate at 98 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation, marking the fourth consecutive year at that level.

The town does not levy a primary property tax, and the secondary rate is used to repay voter-approved debt while maintaining required reserve levels and preparing for future bond issuances.

The budget was first presented during an April 21 study session. A preliminary budget adoption is scheduled for May 19, followed by final adoption on June 9.

Pfof said the proposal reflects a difficult but necessary balance.

“We did the very best to balance and keep continuity of operations as best as possible,” she said.

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