



Neighbors

ALA student
to debate in
London; **18**



INDEPENDENT



Community

Council toughens
restrictions on
e-bikes; **4**

July 2026

Volume 5 Issue 7

Your Nonpartisan Community Newspaper • YourValley.net

Mario Paniagua brings a lifetime of public service to Gilbert

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Air Force taught Mario Paniagua how to load missiles onto F-16 fighter jets.

It also set him on a path he never expected would lead to becoming Gilbert's town manager.

More than three decades after leaving Southern California for basic training, Paniagua now finds himself leading one of Arizona's fastest-growing and most closely watched communities at a pivotal moment. Gilbert is approaching buildout, wrestling with long-term financial pressures and trying to preserve the quality of life that made it one of the nation's most desirable places to live.

For Paniagua, it is the culmination of a career built not around one grand plan but around a simple calling.

"When I think back to my draw to the Air Force and going into city things, I've just always had this draw to public service," he said. "It's just kind of who

• See **Paniagua** on page 16

Therapy dog Scout helps children read while healing a family's grief

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The purple blanket is Scout's signal.

When Jessica Etheridge pulls it from the closet, brushes the golden retriever's coat and gathers a bag of books, Scout knows exactly where she is headed.

Soon enough, the dog settles onto the blanket, waits patiently for young readers and prepares for another day helping children find confidence one page at a time.

For the students at Gilbert Arts Academy, Scout is a comforting reading companion. For Etheridge, a Mesa resident, the therapy dog has become part of a journey through grief, healing and purpose after the death of her son, Alex.

Scout entered the Etheridge family during the COVID-19 pandemic as a puppy and family pet. Alex, then a young teenager, was especially excited when he was chosen to carry the puppy home.

• See **Scout** on page 14

Jessica Etheridge and Scout have poured their grief over losing Jessica's son Alex into therapy service. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)



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Gilbert plans to raise short-term rental fees

Gilbert is moving to raise the fees it charges short-term rental operators, with town officials saying the current rate leaves the general fund subsidizing a program that was intended to pay for itself.

The Gilbert Town Council voted unanimously June 23 to approve a notice of intention to increase the town's short-term rental license and renewal fees from \$100 to \$250 and set a public hearing on the change for Sept. 1.

If approved after that hearing, the new fees would take effect Oct. 1.

Town staff told council the increase is meant to make the program revenue neutral, not to generate profit. Gilbert's short-term rental program is recovering only about half of its operating costs, with the balance covered by the town's general fund.

Gilbert has about 450 active short-term rentals, according to town documents. Staff said the program generated \$36,605 in revenue in fiscal year 2024-25 and is projected to bring in about the same amount in fiscal year 2025-26, while operating costs are estimated at \$75,000 for fiscal year 2026.

Go to: tinyurl.com/mudpx-ex2

MEETINGS

Gilbert Town Council

6:30 p.m. Aug. 11

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

www.gilbertaz.gov

COMMUNITY

New e-bikes law includes age limits, helmet rules, speed restrictions

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Gilbert's new e-bike regulations are among the Valley's most comprehensive, with new rules that establish age restrictions, helmet requirements, speed limits and enforcement tools aimed at addressing growing safety concerns involving electric bicycles and similar devices.

Gilbert Town Council unanimously approved the ordinance June 9, immediately putting the new regulations into effect.

The ordinance replaces existing sections of the town code governing bicycles, micromobility devices and motorized play vehicles with a new article covering bicycles, electric bicycles and other transportation devices.

Town officials said the changes are intended to better align Gilbert's code with Arizona law while addressing concerns raised by residents about crashes, reckless riding and increasingly common e-bike activity throughout the community.

Assistant Police Chief Michael Angstead told council members the ordinance applies not only to e-bikes but also to electric scooters, motorized skateboards and several other transportation devices.

Among the most significant changes are new age restrictions. Riders must be at least 12 years old to operate Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes and similar devices. Riders must be at least 16 years old to operate faster Class 3 e-bikes, which can reach speeds of up to 28 mph with motor assistance.

"Currently right now there is no age restriction, so theoretically a 4-year-old could ride a Class 1 e-bike," Angstead



Assistant Police Chief Michael Angstead explains the details of a proposed e-bikes ordinance to Gilbert Town Council. Council adopted the proposal. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

said. "So this is an effort to create a restriction."

The ordinance also establishes a 15 mph speed limit on sidewalks, multiuse paths and within town parks. Riders must additionally travel at a reasonable and prudent speed based on conditions and potential hazards.

A new helmet requirement mandates that riders and passengers younger than 18 wear a properly fitted and fastened helmet. The rule applies to bicycles as well as e-bikes and electric scooters.

The ordinance creates new penalties for reckless riding, operating transportation devices while impaired and fleeing from law enforcement officers.

Angstead said police have encountered riders modifying e-bikes to exceed their factory speed limits.

"The kids have figured out how to hack what would be a Class 3 e-bike to make it go 50 miles an hour," he said.

The ordinance also places responsibilities on parents and guardians, prohibiting them from knowingly allowing

minors to violate the regulations.

Businesses selling or renting transportation devices covered in the ordinance must provide customers information about Gilbert's rules. The code also prohibits the sale of Class 3 e-bikes to anyone younger than 18.

In addition to enforcement measures, the ordinance establishes a Gilbert transportation device safety program. Eligible violators may complete the educational program instead of paying a civil fine. Minors must attend with a parent or guardian.

The ordinance follows months of discussion by town officials after rising concerns about organized e-bike and electric motorcycle ride-outs, youth crashes and reckless riding.

Town data presented to council showed juvenile bicycle collisions involving vehicles increased from 20 in 2022 to 55 in 2025, while adult collisions rose from 30 to 44 during the same period.

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BUSINESS

Del Prado Plaza businesses back open after structural scare



Temporary structural supports in the back of Del Prado Plaza allowed tenants to move back in. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

As lunchtime approached, Tom Rochanakit worked the dining room of Cafe de Bangkok, greeting his customers as they steadily came through the doors.

Some stopped by to offer encouragement. Others came specifically because they had heard the restaurant was finally open again.

After more than two weeks of uncertainty, Rochanakit was back doing what he does best — serving food and welcoming regulars at his highly rated Thai food restaurant.

The reopening of Cafe de Bangkok and other businesses at Del Prado Plaza marks a return to normalcy after Gilbert Fire & Rescue lifted an evacuation order that forced tenants from the commercial

center at 1111 N. Gilbert Road earlier this month.

The closure displaced several small businesses, disrupted employees' livelihoods and left tenants scrambling for answers while emergency stabilization work was completed.

Fire Chief Rob Duggan was one of those who stopped by Cafe de Bangkok for lunch June 17, even getting a hug from Rochanakit. The chief said public safety drove the decision to close the building.

"We needed to do it to make sure that the business owners, the business operators, our residents — they expect when they walk into a business that it's going to be a safe building, and we certainly take that obligation very seriously," Duggan said.

Duggan acknowledged the disruption.

• See **Scare** on page 23



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NEWS IN BRIEF

Gilbert Chamber passes out awards at business luncheon

More than 200 business, education, nonprofit, and community leaders gathered last month for the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce's 2026 Annual Business Awards Luncheon, presented by First Western Bank, to celebrate the organizations and individuals whose leadership, innovation, and service continue to strengthen the Gilbert community.

The annual event highlighted the Chamber's 2025-2026 theme, Connecting the Dots: From Opportunity to Belonging, while recognizing the entrepreneurial spirit, resilience, and collaboration that define Gilbert's business community.

"Today's honorees represent the very best of Gilbert," said Sarah Watts, President and CEO of the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce. "They demonstrate what is possible when businesses, nonprofits, educators, and community leaders work together to create opportunity, invest in others, and build a stronger future."

Honorees included:

2026 Chamber Volunteer of the Year: Shawna Treat, Melaleuca

2026 Foundation Volunteer of the Year: Stuart Preston, Cingularis

Gilbert Leadership Alumni Award: Barbara Guy, ProSmart Realty

Scholarship and Community Impact Awards: Ashley Maddox, Arizona State University; Cooper Johnson, Perry High School; Hollynn Thornock, Higley High School; Kevin Chen, Hamilton High School.

Emerging Business Leader of the Year: Anthony Synegal, Westpac Wealth Partners

Business Leader of the Year: Dallas Sloan, Colair Beauty Lounge and Med Spa

Nonprofit of the Year: (tie) The Compassion Alliance, HD South

Emerging Business of the Year: Blue Zone Marketing

Business of the Year: Arizona Wilderness Brewing Co.

IMPACT Award: Margaret Travillion, Lauren's Institute for Education

President's Award: Shane McCord, Gilbert Public Schools

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BUSINESS MOVES



Compiled by Tom Blodgett INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

NOW OPEN

1 The Back Nine Golf opened a second location in Gilbert on May 30 at 732 E. Warner Road, suite 101, Gilbert. It features 24/7 access for members, alongside public tee time bookings on its indoor golf simulator. 480-539-7701. <https://thebackninegolf.com/local/gilbert-az-downtown/>

2 Blitz Sports Center opened at 2070 S. Power Road, suite 101, Gilbert. It is an indoor multisport facility that features volleyball, basketball, and pickleball courts and serves as the home for youth sports programs, adult open gyms, camps, clinics, and tournaments. It is available for rentals. 480-818-4585. <https://blitz-sports.com>

3 The Fuge Auto Spa opened April 23 at 615 W. Ray Road, Gilbert. It is

a car wash and detailing center. 480-299-5771. www.thefugeautospa.com

4 Gilbert Home Cleaning opened in April from 1530 E. Williams Field Road, suite 201, Gilbert. It offers professional house cleaning services including standard cleaning, deep cleaning, move-in/move-out, Airbnb turnovers and recurring maid service. 480-470-5905. <https://gilberthomecleaning.com/>

5 Made to Thrive Therapy opened at 3303 E. Baseline Road, suite 104, Gilbert. Karissa Whitlatch provides trauma-informed therapy for individuals seeking healing, growth, and deeper emotional well-being. Her work focuses on helping people process current life challenges and unresolved trauma that may still be impacting relationships, emotions and daily life. She is trained in EMDR

therapy, attachment and parts-work, and Sensorimotor Psychotherapy. 480-788-9816. www.madetothriveaz.com

6 Perry's Steakhouse Grille opened June 8 at 865 S. Santan Village Parkway in the Northside at SanTan Village development. The restaurant accommodates up to 350 guests, has 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. They opened a restaurant in 1993. It has 22 locations in eight states, and the Gilbert location is the first in Arizona. <https://perryssteakhouse.com>

7 Pratik Investments opened April 30 at 2730 S. Val Vista Drive, suite 182, Gilbert. It does business investment services.

8 Tecovas, a Western wear retailer, opened a new store June 18 at 2168 E. Williams Field Road, suite 109, Gilbert, in the SanTan Village mall. The Gilbert location, the company's 64th in the nation, will feature an open layout intended to allow customers to browse and try on merchandise. 480-531-1063. www.tecovas.com/stores/santan-gilbert

9 Urban Butcher opened May 26 at 2490 S. Recker Road, Gilbert, in the Verde at Cooley Station development. It is an independently owned premium butcher shop. 602-702-6449. <https://urbanbutchermarket.com>

COMING SOON

10 Allora Gelato anticipates opening at 51 W. Vaughn, suite 105, Gilbert in the Collab. It serves gelato from globally sourced ingredients. No opening date has been announced. www.alloragelato.com



PERRY'S STEAKHOUSE GRILL

11 Amerizona Firearms Training anticipates opening this year at 2473 S. Higley Road, suite 104-253, Gilbert. It will offer NRA firearms training classes. 480-818-4412.

12 Bojangles will open its first Arizona restaurant July 20 at 3765 S. Val Vista Drive, Gilbert. The fast-food chain based in Charlotte, North Carolina, is a chicken and breakfast brand with made-from-scratch food. It plans to open 20 Arizona stores. www.bojangles.com

13 Chipotle anticipates opening at 681 S. Higley Road, Gilbert. It is a fast-casual restaurant chain that specializes in customizable tacos, burritos, and bowls. It will be the seventh location in Gilbert. No opening date has been announced. www.chipotle.com

14 Fogo de Chao anticipates opening later this year in an 8,424-square-foot space in the upcoming Signature at SanTan Village retail development, near the intersection of Williams Field Road and SanTan Village Parkway. It is a Brazilian steakhouse and has another location in Scottsdale. <https://fogodechao.com>

15 Level 1 Bar Arcade will return to Gilbert at The Gilmore, the under-construction development at Val Vista Drive and Germann. The bar features vintage video games and pinball machines. It previously opened in the Heritage District but left in January 2025 after a new lease agreement could not be reached. It also has a

• See **Moves** on page 9

Moves

• From page 8

location in Mesa. It anticipates opening in Gilbert by December. <https://www.level1arcade.bar>

16 Ox Korean BBQ is planning to open a location at Power and Ray roads in Gilbert in 2027. It recently opened a restaurant in Avondale. No other details are available.

17 Romp n' Roll anticipates opening this summer at 3546 S. Power Road, suites 110-112, Gilbert. The gym offers classes — including interactive art, music, dance, cooking and science — camps and parties. It has flexible month-to-month memberships. 623-264-4003. <https://romp-nroll.com/gilbert-az>

RELOCATIONS

18 Aircraft Engine Specialists moved into a new facility May 11 at 612 E. Germann Road, Gilbert. It is an FAA-certified repair station specializing in Lycoming and Continental engine overhauls and repairs. 480-516-0390. <https://aircraftengine-specialists.com>

19 Elite Vocational and Tutoring Services relocated from a Baseline Road office to 161 E. Rivulon, suite 104, Gilbert. It assists individuals in the areas of vocation, education and daily life skills, promoting independence and opportunity in all aspects of life. 480-340-9237. <https://evtsaz.com>

20 K. Clark Family Medical moved in May to an office at 4365 E. Pecos Road, suite 140 K, Gilbert. The family medicine practice offers in-office and mobile primary care, psychiatric care, biomedical hormone replacement, sports physicals, sick visits, telehealth, lab orders and imaging orders. 480-256-9193. www.kfamily-medicine.com

21 Wood Aesthetics Health and Wellness moved from Gilbert Road to a new location at 929 N. Val Vista Drive, Gilbert. The woman-owned med spa offers a wide selection of services, including virtual wellness visits, medical-grade injectables, weight loss injections, chemical peels, Peptide therapeutics, IV hydration therapy, ZO Skin health products, and Alastin Skincare. 623-562-9939. www.woodaestheticshealthandwellness.com

NEW NAME

22 Gilbert Yoga Studio has re-branded as Gilbert Flex Studio at 655 N. Gilbert Road, suite 162, Gilbert. It now includes instruction in Pilates and various forms of dance along with yoga. 480-420-7297. www.gilbertyoga.com

NEW OWNERSHIP

23 The Art House at 36 N. Gilbert Road, Gilbert, changed ownership May 2 with the McKiernan family selling it to artist Ginger Hamilton. It offers instructor-led art classes and a private venue space. 480-818-5831. <https://arthousegilbert.com>


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ELECTION

Profiles of Gilbert Town Council candidates



Chuck Bongiovanni
Occupation: Vice mayor Gilbert, CEO Majestic Residences Franchise Systems
Gilbert Chamber/Independent podcast: guidinggrowthpodcat.com/episodes/chuck-bongiovanni
 • See **Chuck** on page 11



Bobbi Buchli
Occupation: Town council member, Real estate broker
Gilbert Chamber/Independent podcast: guidinggrowthpodcat.com/episodes/bobbi-buchli
What in your estimation is the biggest
 • See **Buchi** on page 11



Joel Coen
Occupation: President of TruNorth Advisors LLC
Gilbert Chamber/Independent podcast: guidinggrowthpodcat.com/episodes/joel-coen
What in your estimation is the biggest
 • See **Coen** on page 11



Beth Goulden
Occupation: Retired law enforcement/consultant and small business owner
Gilbert Chamber/Independent podcast: guidinggrowthpodcat.com/episodes/beth-goulden
 • See **Beth** on page 11



Bus Obayomi
Occupation: AI and data consulting manager
Gilbert Chamber/Independent podcast: guidinggrowthpodcat.com/episodes/bus-obayomi
What in your estimation is the biggest challenge
 • See **Bus** on page 11



Bill Spence
Occupation: Retired U.S. Navy lieutenant commander
Gilbert Chamber/Independent podcast: guidinggrowthpodcat.com/episodes/bill-spence
What in your estimation is the biggest challenge
 • See **Spence** on page 11

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Jim Torgeson

Occupation: Mesa Sign Shop owner

Gilbert Chamber/Independent podcast: guidinggrowthpodcast.com/episodes/jim-torgeson

What in your estimation is the biggest challenge facing Gilbert in the next four years?

Gilbert's biggest challenge over the next four years is sustaining our infrastructure; especially

road maintenance and long-term replacement while preserving the quality of life residents expect. That requires a shift in focus toward strengthening our commercial base and expanding employment opportunities, rather than continuing to rely primarily on residential growth. To maintain great parks, safe streets, and high-quality services, we must grow commerce, attract tourism, and bring in high-paying jobs. Broadening our economic base will ensure Gilbert remains a thriving town and avoids becoming a bedroom community dependent on property taxes for its long-term stability.

Chuck

• From page 10

What in your estimation is the biggest challenge facing Gilbert in the next four years?

One of the biggest challenges Gilbert will face over the next four years is balancing growth, infrastructure, and trust while protecting the quality of life that brought many of us here. We are entering a critical phase with our infrastructure — especially roads. Many of Gilbert's roadways are reaching the end of their lifecycle. These are necessary investments to maintain safety, mobility, and the standard of our community. We must also ensure our water and utility systems remain strong, sustainable, and financially sound while rebuilding trust with residents. We have to communicate clearly, transparently, and consistently. Trust is built on truth.

Buchi

• From page 10

mation is the biggest challenge facing Gilbert in the next four years?

One of Gilbert's biggest challenges over the next four years will be balancing responsible growth with preserving the quality of life residents expect. That includes infrastructure, water security, public safety, traffic mobility, and maintaining strong financial stewardship. We must continue planning thoughtfully so Gilbert remains safe, sustainable, and economically strong for future generations.

Coen

• From page 10

challenge facing Gilbert in the next four years?

Gilbert's most urgent challenge is the looming funding gap for our transportation infrastructure. As we approach geographic build-out, our current bond funds are projected to be fully committed by 2028, creating a potential stall in critical road maintenance and construction. We must act decisively to establish a sustainable long-term funding strategy that avoids a gap in our infrastructure pipeline. Neglecting this shortfall risks deteriorating conditions and significantly higher costs later. By addressing this funding cliff now, we maintain the safety and connectivity required to support the best use of our remaining land and preserve our premier quality of life.

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Beth

• From page 10

What in your estimation is the biggest challenge facing Gilbert in the next four years?

The biggest challenge facing Gilbert over the next four years is infrastructure and changing revenue dynamics. We must get our financial house in order while managing growth the right way. We've seen significant budget increases while facing limited revenue options and rising infrastructure costs. We have to be more disciplined in spending, but we also need to grow our revenue base by attracting high-quality businesses that generate sustainable revenue for the town. Growth and redevelopment must be done thoughtfully so Gilbert does not lose its quality of life. Just as important, we need to rebuild trust between the Town Council and residents through transparency and accountability. At the end of the day, it comes down to fiscal discipline, responsible growth, and restoring trust.

Bus

• From page 10

What is the biggest challenge facing Gilbert in the next four years?

Gilbert's biggest challenge is managing growth responsibly while protecting the quality of life that brought so many families here in the first place. That means making smart decisions at the intersection of water, infrastructure, public safety, traffic, and long-term financial sustainability. Gilbert is still growing, but residents also expect strong services, safe neighborhoods, and amenities that keep the town family-friendly and competitive. We cannot afford to treat these as separate issues. The next council must lead with discipline, transparency, and long-range planning so growth pays for growth and today's decisions do not create tomorrow's crisis.

Spence

• From page 10

What is the biggest challenge facing Gilbert in the next four years?

Gilbert's financial health and debt management will remain a major challenge for the foreseeable future. The town is facing serious trust and transparency issues that will require significant changes in leadership and budget philosophy to correct. Spending sprees over the last three years, combined with a "buy now, pay later" mindset, have created an enormous amount of debt, much of it incurred with little public knowledge or input. Gilbert residents are smarter than the current council gives them credit for and, despite repeated excuses, families know the truth and are feeling the effects of poor financial policies every single day.

EDUCATION

GPS, East Valley school districts tout a court win in EVIT lawsuit

By Janet Perez

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The overarching standoff continues nine East Valley school districts and the East Valley Institute of Technology continues, even after the districts scored a victory in court about EVIT's attempt to reduce the funds it distributes for career and technical education satellite programs.

Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Christopher Coury ruled EVIT could not control the use of funds already generated by district satellite programs.

Under the satellite program, students can take CTE classes on their high school campuses rather than going to the two EVIT locations in east and west Mesa.

"EVIT was trying to freeze our Fund 596, which are funds that are generated for kids that are enrolled in satellite programs that attend classes on our campuses and actually don't go to the EVIT campus but are served completely by the districts," said Queen Creek Uni-

fied School District Chief Operating Officer Amber Bordes. "The judge ruled that that was not allowed and that we have the authorization to utilize those funds for any CTE-related classes that we provide on our campuses.

"It's a huge win because we've always felt like those are our funds," Bordes said.

Neither Gilbert Public Schools nor Higley Unified School District officials were available for comment, but GPS did send a communication to parents that struck a positive chord about moving forward with EVIT, calling the relationship a top priority.

"With clear legal guidance now established, we believe the path to a swift, positive resolution between EVIT and local school districts is wide open," the district wrote. "We are highly optimistic that an agreement serving the absolute best interests of all Gilbert students will be reached soon."

Read the full story at <https://tinyurl.com/38e35jcv>

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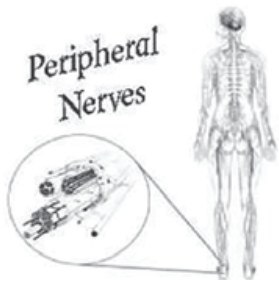
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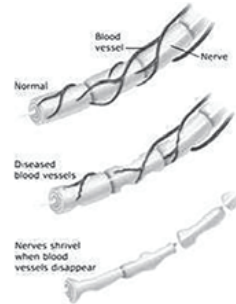
PERIPHERAL NEUROPATHY AND CHRONIC PAIN WARNING!

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.

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Scout

• From page 1

A few years later, the family's life changed dramatically.

Alex was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in 2023 after weeks of unexplained knee pain. Doctors soon discovered the cancer had already spread to other parts of his body.

The diagnosis launched an 18-month battle that included chemotherapy, clinical trials and trips to MD Anderson Cancer Center. Throughout the ordeal, Scout rarely left his side.

"I have pictures of him laying on her and just resting," Etheridge said. "There's another image of her where he's bald and he's just sitting in the chair and she's just sitting right by him with her head up and just looking at him."

Alex continued pursuing the things he loved, including drumming with School of Rock in Gilbert, even as treatments intensified. But eventually the



Scout provides a cushion for Alex Etheridge during his treatment for bone cancer. (Courtesy Jessica Etheridge)

disease progressed beyond what doctors could stop.

In July 2023, Alex died at home under hospice care.

Scout remained there through his final hours.

"She was there throughout the whole

entire process," Etheridge said. "I just really believed she saw this — this is where I need to be."

After Alex's death, Etheridge found herself struggling to adjust.

A stay-at-home mother whose life had revolved around her children's ac-

tivities, she suddenly faced an empty calendar and overwhelming grief.

Then she saw a television segment about Gabriel's Angels, now known as Paws for Youth, and its therapy-dog programs.

"I was like, 'Yeah, that's awesome. I need something to do,'" Etheridge said.

Within months, she and Scout began the certification process. The training focused less on teaching commands and more on evaluating temperament, calmness and how a dog responds to distractions and unexpected situations.

Scout passed.

Etheridge and Scout first participated in community events, including school finals weeks, mental health summits and visits to group homes. Eventually they joined the organization's reading program and were assigned to Gilbert Arts Academy.

There, Scout worked with small groups of students selected by teachers and counselors. Many were struggling

• See **Dog** on page 15



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Dog

• From page 14

readers or children who had become withdrawn and needed additional support.

Each week, students spent 20 minutes reading aloud to Scout.

Not to Etheridge.

Not to a teacher.

To Scout.

"Scout can't hear you. Can you speak up a little bit?" Etheridge would tell students when they read too softly.

The distinction mattered.

The dog never corrected pronunciation. She never judged mistakes. She simply listened.

"When she saw the purple blanket, she always knew we were going to go," Etheridge said. "The kids would come in and do their reading and she would greet them and still stay very calm."

Over time, students who initially arrived shy and hesitant began looking



Jessica Etheridge, left, and Scout have worked with students at Gilbert Arts Academy who have had some sort of trauma and who are trying to improve their reading skills. (Courtesy Paws for Youth)

forward to the sessions.

One child would nearly run into the room to see Scout.

Another carefully tracked every book read during the 12-week program using stickers placed on a paper bookshelf. At the end, students received certificates,

photos with Scout and recognition for their accomplishments.

Teachers also noticed measurable progress.

"They got better with their reading towards the end of the 12 weeks," Etheridge said. "They were more com-

fortable with being able to read aloud."

During celebration ceremonies, teachers would compare reading assessments from the beginning and end of the program.

"Their teacher always reports at the beginning of the program what their reading fluency was at," Etheridge said. "And then they say, now when we check it, it's like double."

The results often left her emotional. "It always almost brings me to tears," she said.

The program has benefited children, but Etheridge says it has helped her as well.

While Scout provided comfort during Alex's illness and after his death, the therapy work gave Etheridge a way to channel her grief into helping others.

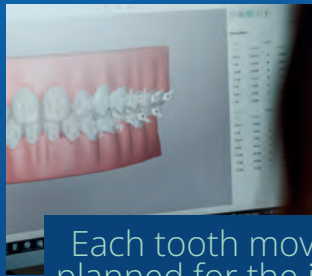
"It's been really great seeing what we do for the kids," Etheridge said. "But it's more given back to me so much and been healing for me."

Tom Blodgett can be reached by email at tblodgett@iniusa.org or follow him @sp_blodgett on X.



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Paniagua

• From page 1

I am.”

That commitment has carried him from missile maintenance to human resources, elections, budgeting, economic development and infrastructure before arriving in Gilbert last year as assistant town manager. Less than a year later, he was selected to succeed Patrick Banger as town manager.

It wasn’t the timeline he expected.

“I wanted to have some more time with the town before taking on such a substantial role,” Paniagua said.

“This role is a tough job. It’s a big deal, and it’s not something that I take lightly at all.”

When Banger announced his departure, Paniagua initially questioned whether he was ready. But as the months passed, something changed.

“The more time I spent working with the town, the more time I spent



Mario Paniagua (Courtesy town of Gilbert)

getting to know this community and getting to know the players and what we do here and how we operate, the

more I began to really love this organization and to love this community,” he said.

“I know I’ve said that a few times. It’s the honest truth. I do love this community.”

That affection is rooted partly in Gilbert’s culture.

After 27 years with the city of Phoenix — including the final decade as deputy city manager overseeing transportation, infrastructure, public works, planning, Sky Harbor Airport and other departments — Paniagua arrived expecting a well-run organization.

What surprised him was how people worked together.

“The one thing that stands out is the organizational culture here, which is so collaborative,” he said.

“There are very open conversations across the town about things that are going on and what we’re doing. Everyone gets to have a say and have some input.”

Growing up in Colton, California,

Paniagua enlisted in the Air Force while still a sophomore in high school. After graduation, he spent seven years serving in Florida, South Korea and at Luke Air Force Base before deciding military life — and frequent moves — wasn’t the future he wanted.

“I enjoyed it, but at the same time I wanted to settle,” he said.

He remained in the Valley, earned a degree emphasizing human resources and joined the city of Phoenix.

Looking back, he laughs at the unlikely career progression.

“If you ever need an A-9 missile loaded onto an F-16, I’m your guy,” he said.

The work evolved dramatically from there.

His years in Phoenix exposed him to nearly every corner of municipal government, including helping coordinate infrastructure needed for Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co.’s massive north Phoenix campus.

• See **Manager** on page 17



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Manager

• From page 16

While he wasn't directly responsible for economic development, he assembled teams responsible for roads, utilities and permitting to help support the project.

That experience now shapes one of Gilbert's highest priorities.

"We're coming to a key time," he said. "We talk a lot about what people call approaching buildout. We're running out of open land to develop. We have to be very smart and very strategic about how we do that."

Economic development conversations today routinely involve the school districts, the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce and other community partners as the town looks beyond simply adding rooftops toward creating jobs and strengthening its long-term tax base.

Just as important, Paniagua says, is maintaining public trust.

He took over shortly after contentious debates over utility rates and long-term infrastructure funding that frustrated many residents already dealing with inflation.

Rather than dismiss those concerns, Paniagua says he understands them personally.

"I grew up really poor," he said. "My family wasn't able to always cover our bills. I know what it's like to not have a tough time financially."

He believes the town's response starts with better communication.

"How we communicate with the public is so important," he said. "We've got to present it in an understandable way."

Paniagua also rejects the notion that resident input disappears into a void.

"Everything we do needs to be guided through resident input," he said.

Sometimes that input results in immediate action, such as changes to a problematic intersection brought forward by a resident at a Town Council meeting. Other ideas take longer, requiring funding, planning and engineering.

"But my point there is we're listening," he said.

Beyond budgets and development plans, Paniagua sees Gilbert standing at an important crossroads.

He points to the town's "City of the Future" initiative as an effort to avoid the decline some older communities experienced after growth slowed.

"We need to stay in front of that and not let that decline happen," he said.

Outside the office, the 53-year-old is preparing for another transition. He and his wife are planning to move from Ahwatukee into Gilbert. Their three adult children remain in Arizona, including a youngest son pursuing a master's degree in neuroscience at Arizona State University.

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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NEIGHBORS

Gilbert student earns spot in Bill of Rights Institute debate program

By Tom Blodgett

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

A Gilbert student will take her debate skills across the Atlantic this fall after being selected as one of 12 students nationwide for a prestigious international civics and debate program.

American Leadership Academy student Nimca Cabdullahi was chosen from an initial field of about 40 students to participate in “Debating Matters: Transatlantic,” a program organized by the Bill of Rights Institute and the United Kingdom-based Debating Matters organization. The five-day program will bring together high school students from the United States and the United Kingdom in London Nov. 11-15 to debate issues facing both nations.

For Cabdullahi, a 17-year-old who will be a senior next school year, the opportunity represents the latest step in a debate journey that began when she enrolled in a speech and debate elective as a freshman.

“Speech and debate was offered as an elective at my school,” Cabdullahi said. “I took it as an elective my freshman year and then two months into the class I was like, ‘OK, I want to do this competitively.’”



Nimca Cabdullahi will travel to London in November to participate in a debate with students from the United States and United Kingdom. (Courtesy Bill of Rights Institute)

She joined the school’s debate team and has continued competing ever since.

Cabdullahi said she did not immediately see herself as a standout debater.

“Not really,” Cabdullahi said. “I noticed halfway through my sophomore year that I was like, ‘I can do something better with this.’ But my freshman year

was not a good year.”

She credits much of her development to debate coaches Heather Hunter and Jennifer Pollak, as well as her teammates.

“They’ve been there for me since the beginning,” Cabdullahi said.

The path to London began when Hunter encouraged students to explore debate opportunities beyond the classroom.

“I liked the Debating Matters one because, I mean, who doesn’t want to go debate in London, right?” Cabdullahi said.

The selection process included coaching sessions, practice debates, peer feedback and a qualifying debate. During the qualifying round, students debated whether Congress has delegated too much or too little authority to the executive branch to use military force.

The upcoming London program will feature debates on topics including artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, NATO and free speech.

The program will also provide Cabdullahi with her first trip outside the United States. Born in Houston, she moved to Arizona in 2020 and ranks

ninth in her graduating class at American Leadership Academy. She plans to study political science or public policy in college before attending law school.

She said debate has helped her develop skills that extend beyond competition.

“It made me respect them and keep calm when engaging opposing opinions,” she said.

Cabdullahi said she is looking forward not only to the debates but also to meeting students from another country and experiencing London.

“I’m so excited. I’m so grateful,” Cabdullahi said.

The opportunity also carries a historical twist. The debates will take place during the year of America’s 250th anniversary, bringing together students from the United States and the United Kingdom roughly two and a half centuries after the nations fought for American independence.

“It’s actually so ironic that we’re having a U.S.-UK debate off during the 250th year,” Cabdullahi 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 tbladgett@iniusa.org or follow him @sp_bloggett on X.



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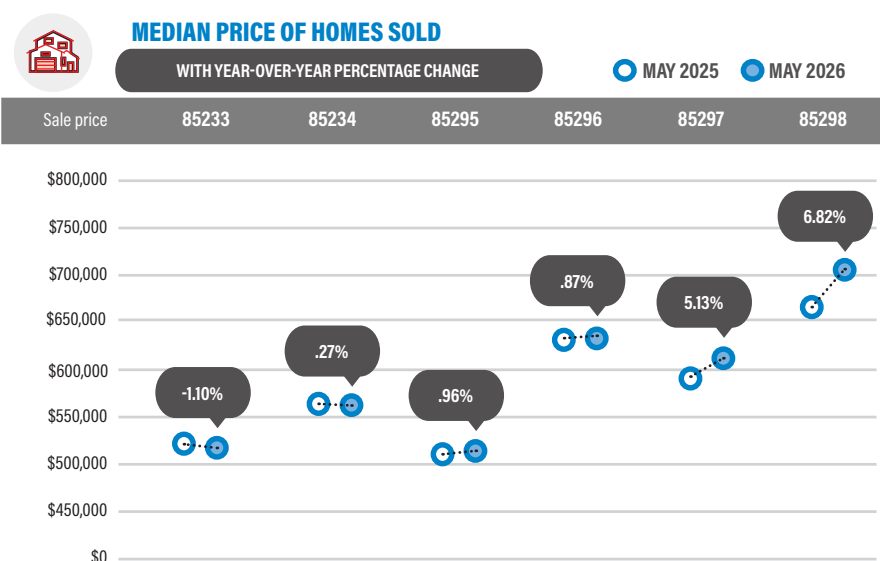
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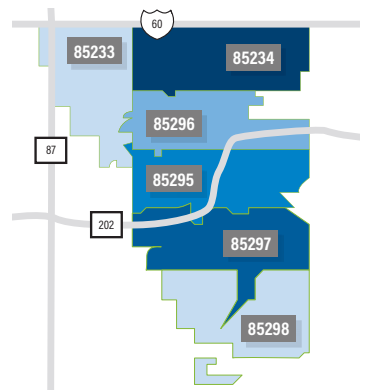
	MAY 2025	MAY 2026
85233	131	93
85234	142	129
85295	156	137
85296	169	160
85297	130	140
85298	214	215

AVERAGE DAYS ON THE MARKET

	MAY 2025	MAY 2026
85233	57	60
85234	49	47
85295	52	45
85296	72	55
85297	71	46
85298	77	72

NUMBER OF HOMES UNDER CONTRACT

	MAY 2026	MAY 2026
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85234	61	55
85295	59	58
85296	58	65
85297	46	53
85298	80	83



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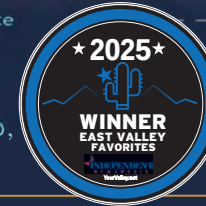
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Cafe de Bangkok welcomed back customers at lunch time after more than two weeks closed. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

Scare

- From page 6

tion caused by the evacuation but said the town's responsibility was clear.

"Understanding it has a tremendous impact on the business owners, property owner — that's not lost on us," he said.

Gilbert Fire & Rescue lifted the evacuation order June 16 after emergency shoring was installed and a structural engineer certified the building stable for occupancy.

Rochanakit was elated to be open again as the shutdown was far more than a temporary inconvenience.

"It was spoiled," Rochanakit said of inventory lost when the building was evacuated. "We had to throw away many food."

The restaurant's reopening required employees to rebuild operations from scratch.

"When we opened the restaurant, we started again," Rochanakit said. "So we have to prepare one or two days. So those food — cut the meat, prep the vegetables, come back again, prepare the sauce."

The closure also created uncertainty for workers.

"Some of them got a job already," Rochankit said. "Some of them don't yet, So the ones who don't yet, OK, I can get them back."

At Jeannie's Grooming, employees were equally relieved to return.

"We're back in action," lead groomer Charli Shinn said before returning to one of her charges. "Glad to be back."

Community response began almost immediately after the evacuation order was issued June 1.

Gilbert's Office of Economic Development and the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce quickly mobilized to connect tenants with resources, temporary workspace options and business assistance.

"We (the city and chamber) connected with each other within hours and had a very quick conversation about making sure that we were supportive of these tenants and accessing any resources we could possibly think of to show them support and connect them with community," Gilbert Chamber President and CEO Sarah Watts said.

The chamber launched an online resource page, contacted its membership and sought assistance from businesses throughout Gilbert.

"We've had members respond in incredible ways offering workspace, offering storage, offering legal expertise, insurance reviews, people to come in and just volunteer to help move these businesses out," Watts said. "We've had members offer temporary employment to displaced workers."

Town Economic Development staff connected tenants with meeting space at The Catalyst, a business resource center run in partnership between the town and chamber. They also helped tenants connect with small-business assistance organizations and information about potential relocation opportunities if needed.

Read the full story at <https://tinyurl.com/t5ftrbtc>.

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