GILBERT INDEPENDENT
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Arizona's Nonpartisan Newspaper
FREE

Town tightens conduct rules amid staff departures

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Gilbert Town Council has tightened its code of conduct to protect employees from intimidation and political pressure as a wave of high-level staff departures raises concerns about stability at Town Hall.

The council voted unanimously Oct. 20 to restrict elected officials' direct contact with employees, unsolicited meetings and recording conversations without consent.

The action comes as Gilbert prepares for four newly elected council members to take office in January and faces the departures of Budget Director Kelly Pfost and Assistant Town Manager Dawn Prince, following several other leadership changes this year.

The turnover also has raised concerns in Gilbert's business community about losing experienced municipal leaders who have helped guide economic development.

Sarah Watts, president and CEO

• See **Rules** on page **10**

Gilbert voters cite country's direction, civic duty

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Concerns about the nation's direction, the character of political leaders and a sense of civic responsibility brought voters and campaign volunteers to a Gilbert polling place on Election Day.

Outside the Southeast Regional Library on Nov. 3, voters and volunteers offered different explanations for their participation, ranging from strong opinions about national politics to a simple belief that voting is an obligation of citizenship.

For Nathaniel Robinson, 27, the election represented an opportunity to participate in democracy in his new home state.

Robinson recently moved to Arizona from Colorado, making Tuesday his first opportunity to vote in an Arizona election.

"I normally go for all the elections, but I just recently moved from Colorado, so now it's my first one here in Arizona," Robinson said.

His motivation was less about a particular candidate or issue than the importance of participation.

"I just think it's important that everybody goes through and does their part for voting," Robinson said.



Michael Gomez, left, and Richard Smith share their views on politics outside the Southeast Regional Library polling place in Gilbert. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

Others outside the polling place expressed more pointed concerns about the political direction of the country.

One woman, who declined to give her name, said her primary motivation was opposition to Andy Biggs.

Anne Hawkins, a precinct captain who was distributing voter guides outside the library, emphasized the qualities she considers essential in elected officials.

"The most important thing is to

• See **Voters** on page **18**

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NEWS IN BRIEF

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INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Revenue falls, expenses rise in GPS annual report

Gilbert Public Schools saw revenue decline $7.5 million while expenses rose $3.2 million during fiscal 2026, reflecting the financial pressures of declining enrollment and rising operating costs.

The district's annual financial report, presented to its governing board on Oct. 13, showed state and local revenue for maintenance and operations and unrestricted capital falling from $300.2 million to $292.7 million, a 2.5% decrease.

Expenditures in those categories increased from $295.6 million to $298.8 million, approximately 1.1%.

District officials attributed the revenue decline to falling enrollment, which has required staffing adjustments, while inflation, utilities, special education tuition and employee benefits continued to pressure spending.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/dwzb-pyv8

Higley reports mounting budget pressures

Higley Unified School District's annual financial report revealed how declining enrollment, a shrinking budget override and costly air-conditioning problems are affecting district finances.

The report covers fiscal year 2026, which ended June 30, and documents more than $173 million in expenditures across all district funds, down from approximately $175 million the previous year.

The report showed that the district maintained much of its spending on classroom instruction while confronting the growing costs of maintaining aging facilities with fewer resources.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/4bynzx-pz

Higley details spending as override nears expiration

Higley Unified School District spent $9.3 million in voter-approved override funding during the past fiscal year, but officials face difficult decisions as that funding approaches elimination in 2027-28.

Chief Financial Officer Sharon Rushcamp presented the district's annual maintenance and operations override report on Oct. 27, outlining how the money supported teacher compensation, classroom staffing, elementary programs and other educational services.

The report comes after voters rejected override renewals in 2024 and 2025, triggering a three-year reduction in funding that will culminate in the loss of an estimated $14.17 million annually. Rushcamp said the district has been able to maintain programs and staffing by drawing on its accumulated budget balance carryforward.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/fbdpw-wy2

Higley approves bond refinancing to save money

Higley Unified School District will refinance a portion of its outstanding bonds in a move designed to save taxpayers at least $1 million in interest expenses while retiring the district's existing bond debt years earlier than scheduled.

The governing board authorized district administrators to pursue a transaction involving as much as approximately $34 million in outstanding bonds, provided the refinancing meets financial safeguards.

Updated estimates from underwriter Stifel Public Finance project the potential savings at more than $2.1 million, but he actual amount refinanced and the savings achieved will depend on interest rates when the bonds are sold, tentatively planned for mid-November.

Unlike conventional refinancing, which replaces higher-interest debt with lower-interest borrowing, Higley's proposal primarily seeks to accelerate repayment of its existing debt.

Under the plan, the district would increase its annual debt payments over the next several years while keeping the secondary property tax rate at or below its current level.

The result would be retiring the district's existing bond debt by fiscal year 2030-31 instead of continuing payments through fiscal year 2034-35.

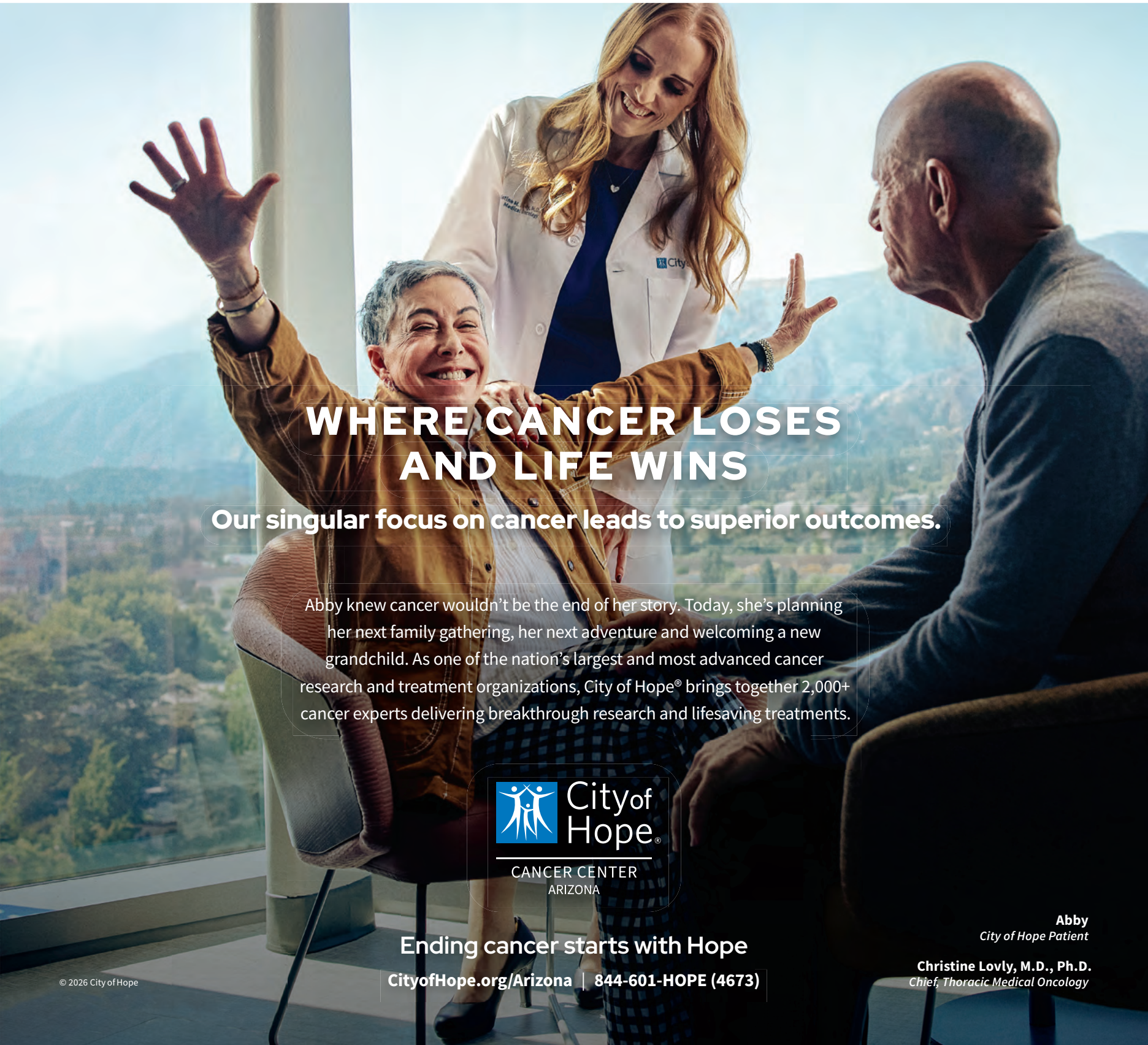
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• See **Community** Page **20**

THIS MONTH IN HISTORY

Nov. 23, 1963

With the news that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas one day before the Gilbert Days Parade, organizers worked overnight to turn the annual event into a memorial service. A flat cotton trailer was transformed into a staging area and decorated with black bunting. Gov. Paul Fannin, who had been scheduled to be the grand marshal, spoke along with Mayor Morris Cooper. Future Mayor Dale Hallock served as the emcee.


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BUSINESS NEWS

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Air Force veteran builds second career in millwork

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

John Webster spent more than two decades serving his country in the Air Force, with assignments ranging from military intelligence to diplomatic work at U.S. embassies overseas.

These days, the retired lieutenant colonel leads a different kind of operation as owner of Executive Millworks, a commercial woodworking company he purchased in 2019 despite having little experience in the trade.

As Veterans Day approaches, Webster's experience illustrates how military service can prepare veterans for success in unexpected civilian careers.

At 57, Webster has grown Executive Millworks to three times its size when he purchased it, expanding the company's reach beyond Arizona.

He credits military leadership lessons with helping him navigate the transition.

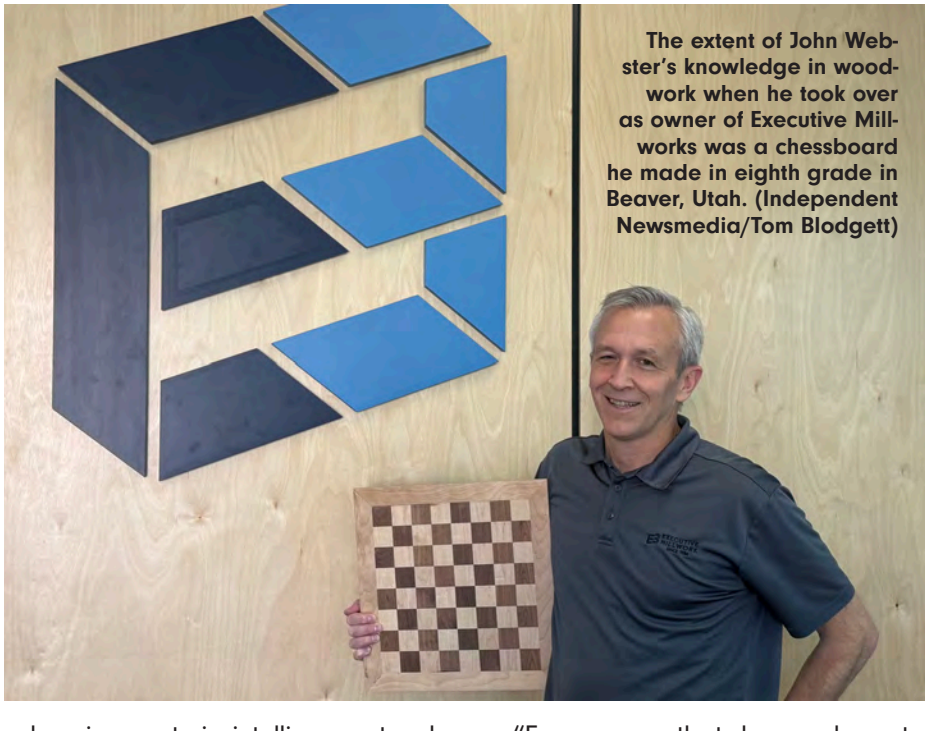
As a young first lieutenant in Hawaii, Webster commanded 65 airmen, many of whom possessed far more experience than he did.

"You learn to trust the people that work for you that know what they're doing, and you get a sense of you're going to be successful as you empower them to do what they know how to do best," Webster said. "Don't try to micromanage them."

That philosophy guides his management of Executive Millworks, where experienced craftsmen possess technical skills he did not bring to the business.

Webster grew up in Beaver, Utah, and attended the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs after an older brother suggested it.

His military career lasted more than 21 years after graduation and included assignments in intelligence, teaching political science at the academy, serving at U.S. embassies in Finland and Moldova and working on defense policy at the Pentagon.



The extent of John Webster's knowledge in woodwork when he took over as owner of Executive Millworks was a chessboard he made in eighth grade in Beaver, Utah. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

He retired when his oldest child entered high school, allowing the family to settle in Arizona.

Webster joined a Mesa engineering company working on defense projects and enrolled in Arizona State University's weekend MBA program to strengthen his business skills. An entrepreneurship class required students to evaluate a privately held company interested in selling.

His next-door neighbor happened to own Executive Millworks with his brother. They had established the company in 1986.

Webster examined its finances for his MBA project and eventually purchased the business.

"For a guy that knows how to make a chessboard, that's about it," Webster said of his woodworking experience when he took over.

Executive Millworks specializes in commercial millwork, serving general contractors on construction and remodeling projects rather than residential customers.

Webster saw an opportunity to expand a company whose previous owners had maintained approximately the same size for nearly a decade.

Seven years later, the business is three times larger, with projects extending beyond Arizona. Its largest current assignment involves an expansion of a Veterans Affairs hospital in Dallas, Texas.

Growth has brought challenges, including finding younger workers willing to learn skilled trades.

Webster also understands the difficulties veterans face entering the civilian workforce.

Despite extensive military training and leadership experience, he struggled to determine where his qualifications fit when searching for employment after retirement.

He remains grateful that the Mesa engineering company hired him despite his unconventional background.

He hopes other employers will recognize the transferable skills veterans bring.

"And I think if I was going to leave a message was companies, when they're hiring veterans, look beyond just the normal," Webster said. "Do they have these skills? Because there are things like discipline and adaptability and willingness to learn and the other skills that the military teaches you, and they can learn the other with a little OJT (on-job training)."

Webster also serves on the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce board of directors and public policy committee, maintaining his interest in government and community affairs.

Chamber President and CEO Sarah Watts remembers walking into his business to ask him to be involved and the intrigue he expressed about contributing to the community in a different way.

"I'm so grateful, quite honestly, that I took the chance on him and that he took the chance on us," she said. "He is just a thoughtful, compassionate leader who is humble and listens and takes in different perspectives."

For now, Executive Millworks remains the focus of a second career he never envisioned when he entered the Air Force Academy.



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BUSINESS MOVES



Compiled by Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

OPENINGS

1 **A Sandwich Co.** opened Sept. 26 at 2490 S. Recker Road, suite 102, Gilbert, at Verde at Cooley Station. It makes its sandwiches with locally sourced products whenever possible, high-quality ingredients, fresh vegetables, good bread, quality meats, and housemade flavors. 480-550-5522. asandwich.co

2 **Dave's Hot Chicken** opened a restaurant Sept. 18 at 2566 S. Market Street, Gilbert, in the SanTan Village Marketplace. The fast-casual chain specializes in Nashville-style hot chicken. 480-480-2195. daveshotchicken.com/

3 **Gilbert Imports** opened Sept. 8 at 1021 N. Gilbert Road, suite 104, Gilbert. It services European, Japanese and electric cars from Porsche, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Volkswagen, Toyota, Lexus, Acura, Honda, Subaru and Tesla. 480-651-2067. gilbertimports.com

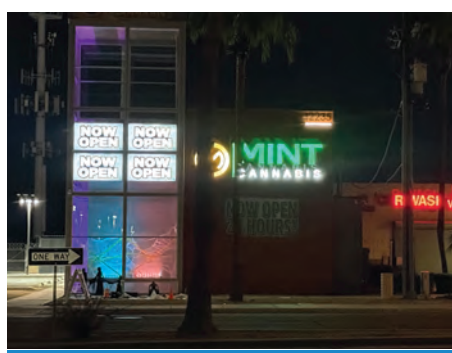


LIN'S GRAND BUFFET

4 **Gold's Jewelry and Loan** opened Oct. 12 at 235 E. Warner Road, suite 106, Gilbert. The elevated pawn shop buys and sells gold and silver jewelry and issues loans against them. 480-766-8306. instagram.com/goldsjewelryandloan Coming soon

5 **Mint Cannabis** opened Oct. 9 at 12235 S. Gilbert Road, Gilbert. The always-open dispensary offers more than 1,100 products on its menu, catering to both recreational adult-use customers and medical patients. It plans a grand opening Oct. 31. 480-320-3004. mintdeals.com/gilbert-az

6 **RockSalt Pilates** opened Aug. 31 at 1451 E. Williams Field Road, Gilbert. It offers music-driven pilates classes. 833-995-7559. rocksaltpilates.com/locations/usa/az/gilbert



MINT CANNABIS



SUSHI BRAKERS

COMING SOON

7 **Aria Nail Bar**, a luxury nail salon, is anticipated to open at Northside at SanTan Village in Gilbert in spring 2027. The salon will occupy a 2,625-square-foot space and will be the company's fifth Arizona location. arianailbaraz.com

8 **Glo Tanning & Wellness** anticipates opening in November at 2743 S. Market St., suite 107, Gilbert. The services planned include luxury sunbeds, custom spray tan booths, red light therapy, blue light therapy, massage therapy and wellness spa amenities. 479-966-4977. glotanning.com/location/gilbert-az

9 **Jab One Fitness** is expanding into Gilbert as trainer Vance Bejarano relocates from Long Beach. It will run from SelfMade Gilbert, a private personal training gym at 874 E. Warner Road, suite 103, Gilbert.

Jab One Fitness does personalized combat sports training by appointment only. 833-522-4665. jabonefitness.com

10 **Lin's Grand Buffet** is expected to open in winter 2026 at 1017 E. Baseline Road in Gilbert, bringing the Arizona-based all-you-can-eat restaurant's first Gilbert location and its 19th location overall. The restaurant will offer a wide selection of Chinese, Japanese and seafood dishes, along with sushi, a Mongolian grill, live cooking stations and traditional Asian-American favorites. The new restaurant will feature seating for up to 275 guests in a modern Asian-inspired dining space. linsrestaurant.com

11 Contemporary Japanese restaurant **Roka Akor** is expected to open its second Arizona location at Northside at SanTan Village in Gilbert by mid-2027. The restaurant will occupy a 4,336-square-foot space with an additional 1,000-square-foot patio and will bring the same dining concept featured at its longtime Scottsdale location. Named one of the top sushi destinations in the United States by Bon Appétit magazine, Roka Akor specializes in robata-grilled steaks, seafood and sushi in an upscale setting. rokaakor.com

12 **Roll & Rise Bagels**, which has been a fixture at the Gilbert Farmers Market, is moving into a store front at 2524 S. Santan Village Parkway, suite 102, Gilbert, in the SanTan Pavilions. Matt and Katie Winterland make scratch-made, hand-rolled, and boiled sourdough bagels utilizing a three-day preparation process. No opening date has been announced. 480-845-3750. rollandrisebagels.com

13 **Salad & Go** plans to reopen the location at 3299 E. Williams Field Road, Gilbert, before year's end. The regional chain, which originated in Gilbert, had declared bankruptcy in August and most locations were auctioned off. The Gilbert store's new owners are a pairing of original co-founder Chef Daniel Patiño with Hospitality First Concepts. 602-904-5828. saladandgo.com/locations/williams-field-higley

14 **Soban Seoul** anticipates opening Dec. 1 at 1530 S. Val Vista Drive, suite 103, Gilbert. It plans to serve traditional Korean home-style cooking and fermented dishes. Its kitchen will operate without a freezer, focusing on fresh, market-to-table ingredients. sobanseoul.com

RELOCATIONS

15 **Iconic Arizona** moved its corporate office in September from a home-based business to 610 N. Gilbert Road, suite 312, Gilbert. It is a locally owned, desert-inspired online apparel brand and design house that operates administratively out of Gilbert, selling its clothing and gear primarily through its e-commerce platform and a network of regional retail partners. 602-332-3041. iconicarizona.com

NEW OWNERSHIP

16 Deana Smith purchased in September the **barre3** studio at 3150 E. Ray Road, suite 112, Gilbert, in the Epicenter development, as well as a Chandler studio, from Andrea Laughlin. Barre3 features workouts that combine strength, cardio, and mindfulness. 602-556-5590. online. barre3.com/studio-locations/gilbert-epicenter

17 **Sushi Broker**s at 50 E. Vaughn Ave., suite 101, Gilbert, has come under new ownership. It still serves more than 50 specialty and classic sushi rolls, fresh daily sashimi and nigiri, bento boxes, shareable appetizers, and a full kitchen menu featuring burgers, chicken, yakisoba, and wok bowls 480-505-5000. sushibrokers.com

NEW MANAGEMENT

18 **Lush Nail Bar** came under new management in September at 1090 S. Gilbert Road, Gilbert. It offers a comprehensive menu of personal grooming and self-care treatments. While they specialize primarily in advanced nail services, their menu also covers lash and facial care. 480-590-1226. lushnailbaraz.com

NEW NAME

19 Kerry's Car Care at 4655 E. Queen Creek Road, Gilbert, has transitioned to become **Sun Devil Auto**. Both brands are owned by Sun Auto Network. The shop still full-service auto repair, maintenance and diagnostics. 623-294-8458. sundevilauto.com

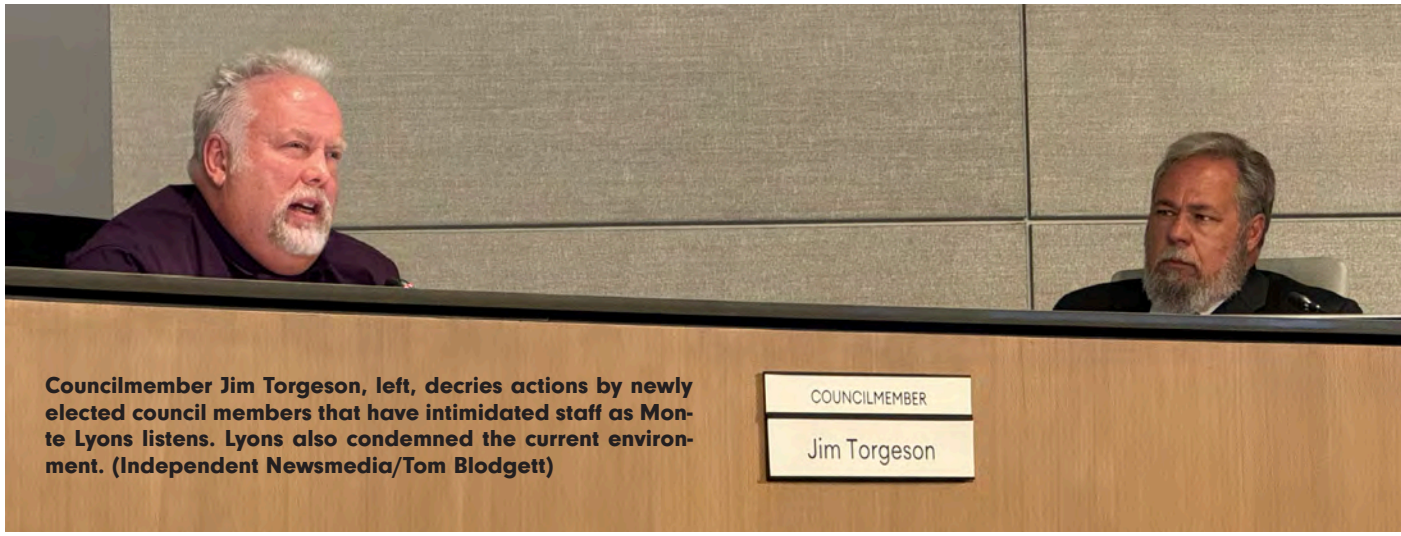
EXPANSION

20 **A Perfect Party Rental** at 1240 N. Hobson St., ste. A, Gilbert, has expanded its business to include plastic rental bins with accompanying floor dollys. The company's core business has been renting bounce houses and party supplies. 480-255-5591. aperfectpartyrental.com



Rules

• From page 1



Councilmember Jim Torgeson, left, decries actions by newly elected council members that have intimidated staff as Monte Lyons listens. Lyons also condemned the current environment. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

of the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce, said continuity in town leadership plays an important role in attracting and retaining businesses.



Kelly Pfost



Dawn Prince

"These types of departures have a direct impact on business and specifically business attraction," Watts said. "So when you look at the way we attract business as a community and to some extent retain business, predictability is an investment and these decisions are based on strong, steady, tenured leadership."

Vice Mayor Chuck Bongiovanni and council members Monte Lyons and Jim Torgeson proposed the code revisions, citing concerns about hostile behavior toward employees and accusations directed at the Gilbert Police Department.

"I have seen in the last couple of months some behaviors that are potentially creating a toxic environment, and I have seen staff members leaving," Bongiovanni said. "I've heard rumblings of others leaving."

Although council members expressed concerns about the political environment and employee retention, no direct connection has been established between the conduct they criticized and individual administrators' decisions to leave.

Leadership departures add to concerns

Pfost, Gilbert's budget director for more than 11 years, will leave Nov. 12 to become budget director for Cary, North Carolina. She has described her departure as a matter of professional opportunity and timing.

Prince, whose next destination has not been disclosed, served as interim town manager from Jan. 3 through May 31 following Patrick Banger's departure to become Glendale's city manager. She returned to her assistant town manager position when Mario Paniagua took over June 1.

The departures follow those of Economic Development Director Dan Henderson, Assistant Economic Development Director Jennifer Graves and Intergovernmental Relations Manager Amy Arguilez.

Together, the changes represent a substantial loss of institutional knowledge as Gilbert navigates financial challenges, infrastructure needs and a transition in elected leadership.

Another assistant town manager, Leah Rhineheimer, recently was among three finalists for Pima County administrator but was not selected. She also had been a finalist for Gilbert's town manager position.

Watts said new leadership can bring fresh ideas, but replacing longtime employees' experience is difficult.

"I'm not going to be one that lives in a negative space," Watts said. "So do I think that we will make the best of it? Yes, of course we will make the best of it, but we are losing some incredible knowledge, organizational knowledge that you just simply can't recreate on day one."

Bongiovanni warned that Gilbert risks losing decades of experience if employees become uncomfortable working with elected officials.

Torgeson agreed, noting that Gilbert's experienced employees are attractive to other employers.

"We do need to protect these people," Torgeson said. "We absolutely do."

Business community stresses stability

Watts said experienced municipal employees provide continuity as elected officials change, making a healthy working environment essential.

"Well, of course it's a concern," Watts said when asked about the council's discussion of a potentially toxic working environment. "I think any work environment should be a healthy work environment. Nobody should be expected to work in a toxic space."

She said the departures affect more than staffing because longtime administrators contribute relationships, knowledge and experience that help the town function.

Although confident Gilbert will attract new talent, Watts said the turnover will affect the town's internal culture and broader community.

"And I do think that we will see the impact of this in the time to come," Watts said.

New restrictions on council members

Under the revised code, council members and appointed officials cannot record other officials, employees or individuals acting in an official capacity without everyone's prior consent.

The restriction does not apply to official public meeting recordings or interfere with the public's right to record those proceedings.

Previously, council members could direct questions and information requests to the town manager, town clerk, town attorney, assistant town managers or department heads.

The revised policy limits initial contacts to the town manager, town clerk and town attorney.

Council members also cannot initiate unsolicited contact with other employees or independently request meetings with staff. Requests must go through the town manager, who determines the appropriate response.

• See **Rules** on page **22**

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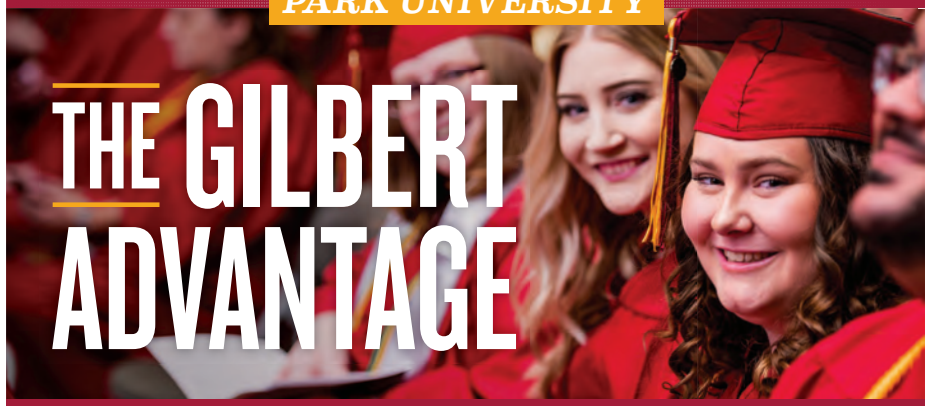
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Higley faces deeper cuts as reserves dwindle



Higley USD Superintendent David Loutzenheiser discusses the next maintenance and operations budget with the governing board. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

By Tom Blodgett
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Higley Unified School District faces another round of budget cuts, potentially including employee layoffs, as the loss of its maintenance and operations override threatens to exhaust district savings by fiscal 2029.

Superintendent David Loutzenheiser presented the district's financial outlook to the governing board on Oct. 27, warning that maintaining current spending levels is no longer sustainable as override funding disappears and enrollment continues to decline.

The district has been using accumulated savings, known as budget balance carryforward, to preserve staffing levels, class sizes and educational programs despite declining revenue.

But those reserves are projected to fall to approximately $14 million by fiscal 2028, roughly equal to the projected gap between annual operating revenue and expenditures if spending remains unchanged.

That would leave the district without sufficient reserves to continue covering its operating shortfall in fiscal 2029.

The projections do not include additional spending reductions or adjustments for further enrollment declines.

The financial pressure comes primarily from the expiration of a 15% M&O override that voters last approved in 2019. The override once generated more than $14 million annually but has been declining since voters rejected its renewal in November 2025.

The district received approximately $9 million in override funding in fiscal 2026 and a little more than $4 million in the current fiscal year. It will receive none in fiscal 2028.

Loutzenheiser said the district has not operated without at least some override funding since approximately 2003.

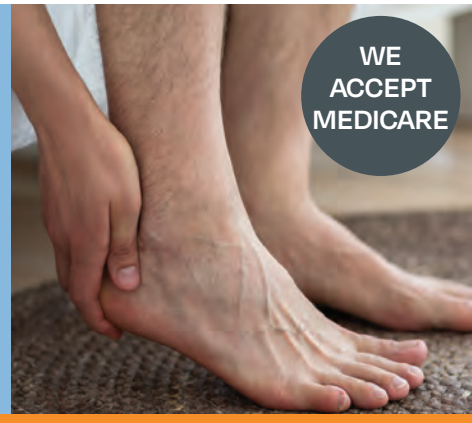
The district also must continue

• See **Higley** Page **13**

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Higley

• From page 12

transferring more than $3 million annually from its operating resources to cover lease payments on its middle schools, an obligation extending through 2053.

Although those payments are made from capital funding, Loutzenheiser said doing so without any transfers from the M&O budget would consume roughly half of the district's annual capital allocation, leaving insufficient resources for building maintenance, curriculum materials, technology and other needs.

The district's financial reserves were built in part through savings achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic, when federal relief funding allowed Higley to cover some operating expenses without substantially expanding permanent staffing.

Those savings have provided a cushion as enrollment declined and the override phased out.

District officials already have reduced staffing and departmental spending during the past two fiscal years, while using other available funding sources to relieve pressure on the M&O budget.

Those efforts, however, have not eliminated the projected shortfall.

Layoffs could become necessary

Loutzenheiser said previous staffing reductions have largely been accomplished through attrition, allowing the district to eliminate positions as employees departed without necessarily laying off existing workers.

He cautioned that the next round of reductions could be different.

"Even what we anticipate we need to do this year, I don't know if attrition will get there," Loutzenheiser said. "There's a possibility we have to do reduction in force."

The district is beginning its fiscal 2028 budget discussions earlier than in previous years to allow time for decisions that could affect employees and educational programs.

The governing board is scheduled to discuss its budget priorities in November, with administrators returning in December to present spending-reduction options.

Those options are expected to include proposed dollar amounts and corresponding staffing reductions.

The board will have to determine how much additional spending to eliminate and how much of its remaining carryforward balance to preserve.

If layoffs become necessary, the district anticipates beginning employee notifications in late February.

The board is scheduled to consider a tentative fiscal 2028 budget and any necessary reductions in force March 2, followed by the issuance of certified employee contracts March 15.

A separate process for classified

• See **Cuts** Page 23

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A growing network of local providers thinks Arizonans deserve better, and they're working with Corner Health to build a different kind of primary care practice to prove it.

Through Corner Health, more than 100 local practices are putting the focus back on the patient-provider relationship, including several right here in Gilbert.

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Kaue Health & Wellness
732 E Warner Rd, Gilbert, AZ 85296
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Services vary by practice but may include preventative care, annual wellness visits, chronic condition management and women's health. Appointments across the network are typically available in under two days.

To find additional providers, visit CornerHealth.com.

YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD TO-DO LIST

VETERANS DAY BREAKFAST

About: 8:30 a.m.-noon Wednesday, Nov. 11. Gilbert Community Center, 130 N. Oak St., Gilbert.

Info: Honor senior veterans with a ceremony, live music, breakfast, crafts and bingo. The event is open to all ages, but advance registration is required by Nov. 6.

Web: gilbertaz.gov/Home/Components/Calendar/Event/15346/1141

VETERANS DAY CAR SHOW AND CEREMONY

About: Wednesday, Nov. 11. Water Tower Plaza, 45 W. Page Ave., Gilbert. Car show, 3-5 p.m.; ceremony, 5-6 p.m.

Info: Gilbert honors military veterans with tribute speeches, musical performances and military displays. A classic and custom car show precedes the commemorative ceremony. Free admission.

Web: gilbertaz.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/special-events-and-permits/veterans-day

HIGLEY IDOL

About: 6-7:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 12. Higley High School, 4068 E. Pecos Road, Gilbert.

Info: Higley High School showcases student performers in its Higley Idol event. Admission information was not listed on the school calendar.

Web: higleyhigh.husd.org



The Gilbert Days Parade returns to the Heritage District on Nov. 21. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

SEE 'FREAKY FRIDAY'

About: Nov. 12-20, with performance times varying. Actor's Youth Theatre at Life Community Church, 717 W. Ray Road, Gilbert.

• See **Friday** Page **16**

YOUR EVENTS, PLEASE

We welcome your events for our neighborhood To-Do List page. Please send the following for publication in our calendar: name of the event, time, date and location with address and if there is a cost to attend.

Email us: **aznews@iniusa.org**

IN EVENTS

The Independent will host a senior expo Jan. 6, 2027 at Central Arizona College in Apache Junction. Businesses wishing to participate may reach out to the sales team

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Friday

• From page 14

Info: The youth theater company presents the musical comedy about a mother and daughter who unexpectedly switch bodies and discover what life is like in each other's shoes. Tickets $25.

Web: aytaz.org

LEARN ROYAL ICING COOKIE DECORATING

About: 10 a.m.-noon Saturday, Nov. 14, and Saturday, Dec. 5. Agritopia Farm, Farm Hands Classroom, 3000 E. Ray Road, Gilbert.

Info: Local baker Lexi Robinson teaches participants of all skill levels how to decorate cookies using royal icing, including outlining, layering and coloring techniques. Participants take home six decorated cookies. Tickets are $50 per class. Space is limited.

Web: agritopiafarm.com

SEE 'ANNIE'

About: Through Saturday, Nov. 21. Hale Centre Theatre, 50 W. Page Ave., Gilbert. Showtimes include 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

Info: The family musical follows an optimistic orphan whose life changes when she meets billionaire Oliver Warbucks. Adult tickets $65; youth tickets, ages 5-17, $45.

Web: haletheatrearizona.com

GILBERT ART WALK

About: Saturdays except Nov. 21. Gilbert Heritage District, near 222 N. Ash St., Gilbert. 8 a.m.-6 p.m.

Info: Local artists display paintings, jewelry, ceramics, photography and other original works at this family-friendly outdoor art event. Free admission.

Web: discovergilbert.com/events/gilbert-art-walk

GILBERT DAYS PARADE

About: 8:30-11 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 21. Gilbert Heritage District, downtown Gilbert.

Info: Gilbert's annual parade celebrates the town's history and community spirit with floats, marching groups and local organizations. Free admission.

Web: hgilbertaz.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/special-events-and-permits/gilbert-days

GILBERT DAYS FESTIVAL

About: 4-9 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 21. new Ocotillo Bridge. Parking at Gilbert Regional Park, 3005 E. Queen Creek Road, Gilbert.

Info: The community festival features live music, food, local vendors and family activities, including inflatables and backyard games. Free admission to event activities.

Web: gilbertaz.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/special-events-and-permits/gilbert-days/gilbert-days-concert

EXPERIENCE FLEETWOOD MAC'S MUSIC

About: 7 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 21. Higley Center for the Performing Arts, 4132 E. Pecos Road, Gilbert.

Info: Fleetwood Mask, a Fleetwood Mac tribute band, recreates the group's music, costumes and concert experience. Tickets $44-$49.

Web: higleycenter.org/events/an-evening-with-fleetwood-mask

HARRIET BRINGS CHRISTMAS NOSTALGIA

About: 7 p.m. Monday, Nov. 23. Higley Center for the Performing Arts, 4132 E. Pecos Road, Gilbert.

Info: British singer-songwriter Harriet presents Trying to Get the Feeling Again: At Christmas, combining holiday favorites with

• See Harriet Page 17





Harriet
• From page 16

1970s hits by The Carpenters, Barry Manilow, Carole King and others. Tickets $31-$62.

Web: higleycenter.org/events/harriet-trying-to-get-the-feeling-again-at-christmas/

SEE 'A CHRISTMAS CAROL'

About: Nov. 27-Dec. 26, with multiple performances during the requested period. Hale Centre Theatre, 50 W. Page Ave., Gilbert. Showtimes include 11 a.m., 2 p.m., 5 p.m. and 8 p.m., depending on the date.

Info: Hale presents its annual production of Charles Dickens' holiday classic, featuring traditional carols and the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge. Tickets $40-$62, depending on performance.

Web: haletheatrearizona.com

WATER TOWER HOLIDAY LIGHTING

About: 6-8:30 p.m. Monday, Nov. 30. Water Tower Plaza, 45 W. Page Ave., Gilbert.

Info: Gilbert kicks off the holiday season with family activities, live entertainment and the lighting of its downtown water tower. Free admission.

Web: gilbertaz.gov/departments/water-tower-holiday-lighting

HI-FI HOLIDAY CONCERT

About: Dec. 4-19, with performances during the requested period beginning Friday, Dec. 4. Hale Concert Hall, 50 W. Page Ave., Gilbert. Showtimes vary.

Info: Singers perform Christmas favorites in an annual holiday concert featuring seasonal music and festive entertainment. Tickets $47-$62.

Web: haletheatrearizona.com

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Voters

• From page 1

have leaders of good character who are honest and true, and to serve the people and are not out for them," Hawkins said.

Michael Gomez viewed the election through a combination of concerns about international affairs, national security and his religious beliefs.

Gomez expressed strong support for President Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, arguing that the United States faces significant threats from foreign adversaries, particularly China.

He also criticized the news media, contending that Americans are not receiving the information they need to make informed political decisions.

His religious convictions play a substantial role in how he interprets world events and the stakes of American elections.

Gomez said he believes Trump has a particular role in confronting those threats and expressed confidence that the president's political movement would prevail.

"MAGA's going to win," Gomez said. "That's what's going to happen."



Voters file into and out of the polling place at the Southeast Regional Library's Shakespeare Room in Gilbert. (Independent Newsmedia/Tom Blodgett)

Richard Smith pointed to developments in Europe as his motivation for opposing Democratic policies.

"Well, have a look at the news and see what's happening in Paris and the rest of Europe. I don't want that to happen here and Democrat policies are leading exactly to that," Smith said.

While some voters and volunteers focused on the immediate political stakes, another encounter outside the library offered a glimpse of political engagement among those who may not yet be eligible to vote.

Mike Defisser, who was distributing information about ballot propositions, judicial races and other election matters for Legislative District 14, had just finished speaking with a group of seven high school students.

Defisser said the students appeared to lean politically in a different direction from his conservative views but were interested in understanding his positions.

"Oh, that was fascinating," Defisser said "There were seven of them, and they definitely leaned one way, but they were trying to have a conver-

• See **Voters** on page 19



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Voters

• From page 18

sation just to understand conservative viewpoints on everything from education to way they vote to war to just politics in general,"

The students were 17 and 18 years old, Defisser said, meaning some might have been eligible to vote while others were still too young.

He said their willingness to engage with someone whose political views differed from their own was encouraging, even if some of the questions appeared intended to challenge him.

For Defisser, whose parents immigrated to the United States in the 1950s after experiencing World War II in Indonesia, political participation and discussion have particular significance.

"My parents had immigrated here to the U.S. back in the '50s, so I have hope for every generation because my parents, they fought in World War II in Indonesia actually," Defisser said. "I think the fact that they're interested and the fact they're asking questions. I think they were asking questions to kind of maybe pick a debate, but at least they were wanting to talk."

He saw value in the exchange regardless of whether anyone changed their mind.

"No, I think any conversations are good conversations," Defisser said.

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ONLINE

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Gilbert approves school resource officer pacts

Gilbert Town Council has approved nearly $1.46 million in agreements with three school districts to provide police officers at 11 high school and junior high campuses during the 2026-27 school year.

The council approved the intergovernmental agreements with Gilbert Public Schools, Higley Unified School District and Chandler Unified School District as part of its Oct. 20 consent agenda, without discussion.

The agreements total $1,457,599.61, with the town eligible for reimbursement through Arizona's School Safety Program grants awarded to the districts.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/4xwrt59j

Gilbert delays data center regulations over concerns about smaller facilities

Gilbert Town Council delayed adopting sweeping new data center regulations Oct. 20, giving staff more time to address concerns about smaller facilities and rapidly changing technology.

The council voted 6-1 to continue consideration of land development code amendments until Dec. 15, despite staff recommendations to adopt them immediately.

Councilmember Kenny Buckland cast the dissenting vote, arguing Gilbert should put stronger protections in place now and revise them as necessary.

The disagreement was not over whether Gilbert should welcome large data centers. Rather, council members differed over whether to immediately tighten existing regulations or ensure the changes would not unintentionally discourage smaller facilities serving businesses, hospitals and other employers.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/z85spyxm

Council moves meeting times to earlier start

Gilbert Town Council meetings will start earlier under changes intended to shorten lengthy meetings, reduce demands on town staff and make public participation more convenient.

Council approved changes to meeting procedures Oct. 20, including moving regular meetings from 6:30 to 6 p.m., scheduling study sessions on separate days and streamlining routine business.

Councilmember Bobbi Buchli cast the dissenting vote, objecting to the earlier start time because some residents may still be at work.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/44xju4uv

• See GPS Page 21

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GPS
• From page **20**

GPS strengthens campus security, plans upgrades

Gilbert Public Schools has strengthened security across its campuses with improved visitor screening, emergency communications and staff training while identifying additional safety improvements that could depend on voter approval of a bond.

District safety officials outlined the changes during a governing board study session, describing improvements made over the past year and plans to address remaining vulnerabilities at schools.

Among the findings was that a visitor screening system introduced last October has flagged 16 attempts to enter restricted campus areas by individuals identified as registered sex offenders or prohibited from entering under court orders.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/zxvm88kt

GPS seeks new science curriculum for grades 7-8

Gilbert Public Schools is moving toward replacing its seventh- and eighth-grade science curriculum for the first time in as many as 20 years, with an emphasis on increasing academic rigor.

The district's governing board voted unanimously Oct. 13 to advance three curriculum providers for further evaluation, beginning a process that will include committee reviews, public inspection of materials and classroom pilot programs before a final adoption.

Superintendent Jared Ryan said the district believes it has been between 15 and 20 years since it last adopted a new science curriculum for those grades.

Go to: https://tinyurl.com/pt95552y

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Rules

• From page 10

Town Attorney Chris Payne said the changes reinforce Gilbert's council-manager form of government, in which elected officials establish policy while the town manager oversees daily operations.

The restrictions also apply to members of town boards, commissions, committees and task forces.

Concerns about political hostility

Bongiovanni criticized what he described as intimidating behavior by incoming council members, including efforts to record employee conversations and social media accusations questioning Gilbert police officers' integrity. He did not identify the incoming members by name.

"That's not transparency — it's intimidation," Bongiovanni said. "You shouldn't throw a recorder in front of a staff member or a resident saying, 'Let's talk.'"

He also praised Councilmember-elect Bus Obayomi, who spoke during public comment about the need for greater respect between council members and residents.

Lyons described an incident earlier that evening in which a man allegedly followed his son into a gated neighborhood and confronted him at home. Lyons said police were investigating and connected the incident to inflammatory political rhetoric and unsupported corruption accusations.

Torgeson said his home had been vandalized five times, expressing similar concerns about hostility.

Changes precede new council

The revisions were requested Oct. 5 by Bongiovanni, Lyons and Torgeson, with town staff recommending approval.

Bongiovanni and Torgeson were defeated in July's election, which will bring four new members to the seven-member council in January.

Gilbert adopted its code of conduct in June 2023. The existing policy prohibits harassment and inappropriate conduct and provides sanctions ranging from ethics training and censure to fines of up to $500.

The new restrictions took effect Oct. 20, ahead of the incoming council members assuming office.

For Paniagua, the changes come as he works to maintain continuity amid significant executive turnover. Whether the protections help stabilize Gilbert's workforce remains to be seen.

Watts said the town should remember the contributions of those who have dedicated their careers to public service.

"And in some ways I feel like we've lost connection to the fact that they're working every day to make our lives and our community sustainable and fruitful and safe and vibrant," Watts said. "And there should be a level of appreciation for that."

Please submit comments at yourvalley.net/letters or email them to azopinions@iniusa.org. We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines. Tom Blodgett can be reached by email at tblodgett@iniusa.org or follow him on X at @sp_blodgett.

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SCAN TO LEARN MORE & APPLY

Cuts

• From page 13

employees could begin in April.

The accelerated timetable is intended to give employees more advance notice and allow the district to complete required personnel procedures before issuing contracts for the next school year.

Board faces difficult choices

The presentation prompted concern among board members about the consequences of further cuts and how the district should balance its immediate educational needs against long-term financial stability.

Board President Amanda Wade defended previous decisions to use reserves to preserve educational programs and maintain competitive employee compensation, particularly because neighboring districts compete for many of the same teachers and support staff.

She acknowledged the financial situation now leaves the district with fewer options.

"There is no way none of these cuts don't hurt students," Wade said.

Board Member Anna Van Hoek questioned whether previous spending decisions had left the district adequately prepared for the expiration of the override. She also called for more comprehensive long-term financial planning.

The competing perspectives are expected to shape the board's upcoming discussions over how deeply to reduce spending.

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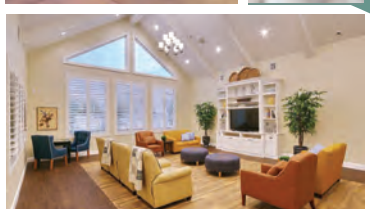


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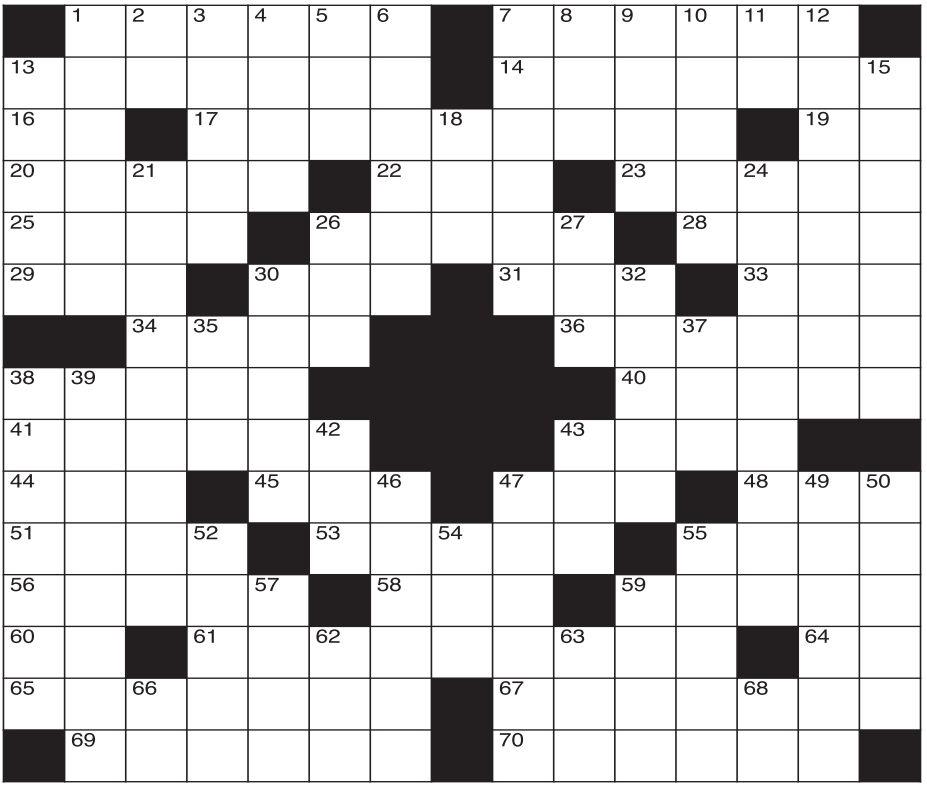


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CLUES ACROSS

1. Spiritual leaders
7. Containing salt
13. Fortified wine
14. Edible mollusk
16. Blood type
17. Make a comparison
19. Government lawyer
20. "Game of Thrones" actor Ciaran
22. 8th month of the year (abbr.)
23. Very willing
25. __ ex machina
26. Satisfies
28. New Zealand mountain
29. A doctrine
30. Popular Dodge truck model
31. Dekagram
33. Naturally occurring solid material
34. Company higher-up
36. Villains
38. Cricket frog genus
40. Influential early psychologist
41. Endured
43. Servant
44. You can get stuck in one
45. __ and feather
47. Passive optical network
48. French ballet dynasty
51. Employee stock ownership plan
53. Forming a bottom layer
55. Sound
56. Yankees slugger Judge
58. Dickens character
59. Beloved late sportscaster Craig
60. "The Mount Rushmore State"
61. Sarcastic and critical
64. Atomic #79
65. Longtime Atlanta Braves pitcher
67. Humor
69. Shawl
70. Preliminary assessment of patients

CLUES DOWN

1. Animal disease
2. Commercial
3. Craft supplies
4. Containers
5. A way to save for your golden years
6. Common Arabic greeting
7. Bulged downward
8. Acquired brain injury
9. Lay about
10. Intestinal
11. Not yes
12. In a way, pleased
13. Messianic figure in Islam
15. Resulting from intense conviction
18. Not in
21. Number above the line in a fraction
24. Lawn pest
26. Pouch
27. Ancient language (abbr.)
30. Start anew
32. Wild flower
35. Fourteen
37. Graphical user interface
38. Facing the same way
39. Campaigns
42. Touch lightly
43. "Boardwalk Empire" actress Gretchen
46. Violent seizure of property
47. One who supports the Pope
49. Malaise
50. Body fluid
52. Inauthentic person
54. Title of respect
55. Moth genus
57. Central Japan city
59. Silk garment
62. Draw from
63. Automobile
66. A male
68. Powerful government lawyer

SOLUTION ON PAGE 27

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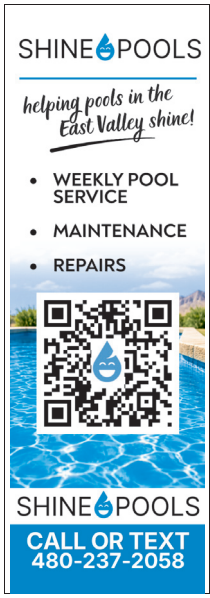
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Remodeling



Miscellaneous



Miscellaneous



Miscellaneous



CROSSWORD SOLUTION

PUZZLE ON PAGE 25

	R	A	B	B	I	S		S	A	L	I	N	E
M	A	D	E	I	R	A		A	B	A	L	O	N	E
A	B		A	N	A	L	O	G	I	Z	E		D	A
H	I	N	D	S		A	U	G		E	A	G	E	R
D	E	U	S		S	A	T	E	S		C	R	A	N
I	S	M		R	A	M		D	K	G		O	R	E
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E	S	O	P		B	A	S	A	L		T	O	N	E
A	A	R	O	N		P	I	P		S	A	G	E	R
S	D		S	A	T	I	R	I	C	A	L		A	U
T	E	H	E	R	A	N		S	A	R	C	A	S	M
	S	E	R	A	P	E		T	R	I	A	G	E	



Miscellaneous



Roofing



Miscellaneous



Sun Screens





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