



YOUR BUSINESS COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Long-term Community Sustainability Through a Healthy Business Environment

**Gilbert Chamber of Commerce
2010 Local Public Policy Priorities
June 15, 2010**

Gilbert Chamber of Commerce
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TO: Mayor and Town Council members

The Gilbert Chamber of Commerce acknowledges these are tough economic times and many difficult decisions face the Town as the economy slowly recovers and the Town nears build-out. To assure long-term sustainability and maintenance of the quality of life Gilbert residents enjoy, the Town Council and management must focus on long-term strategic decisions. Gilbert must be positioned to have the resources to manage the maintenance and operations of infrastructure and public safety once we reach build-out recognizing that the new construction income, which has been a major contributor to the Town's budget, will no longer be available.

For many years the Town had to plan and prioritize based on keeping up with the rapid growth, but now we find ourselves in the position of managing resources for a more stable period with minimal growth.

In the past, the Town has received well deserved recognition for its long-term infrastructure planning and partnerships. However, planning for today and tomorrow must go beyond just infrastructure planning. A healthy business environment is key to achieving the long-term sustainability goals as described above. Efficiencies, technology, and customer service are the foundation to develop a corporate culture that allows businesses to grow and expand here.

A healthy business environment can be defined as an environment where there is limited taxation and regulation of business and the government recognizes that its role is to facilitate and not hamper business operation and growth. In this type of environment, all businesses have a better than average chance to be successful. A healthy business environment encourages both large and small businesses to operate side-by-side to the betterment of the Town. Small businesses make up the majority of Town businesses and are the key to the majority of job creation, but they cannot operate successfully without large businesses. Larger businesses provide high-wage employees who shop at smaller businesses as well as serving as customers to those smaller businesses. A healthy business environment is vital to Gilbert as employers and employees buy buildings and homes here, take pleasure in shopping, invest in community activities and enjoy the many amenities offered throughout our community. The tax base these larger and small businesses provide is essential to infrastructure bonding as well as the countless hours and dollars they and their employees give in community support.

If Gilbert is to achieve a sustainable base for the future, it must not only support current businesses, but it must be able to attract outside companies. Attracting outside companies to locate in Gilbert requires an investment in and a prioritization of business development efforts and continued emphasis on STEM industry attraction.

To support the Town in the creation of a healthy business environment and with the new challenges that the Town faces, the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce has completely revised its past local priorities into three key categories that we believe are essential. We encourage the Town to focus on 1) reasonable taxes, fees, and regulations; 2) efficiencies; and 3) long-term strategic planning. We believe the priorities discussed throughout this document will provide the Town Council and staff a better understanding of the Chamber philosophy and perspective on issues that are business related. Some of these priorities have come forward in the past; others will be part of future discussions with the Town.

While this document focuses on the future, we cannot close without thanking both the Council and the Town staff for their past efforts to support businesses and for their commitment to our community. We look forward to working together to make these priorities a reality.

Best regards,

Susan Brechbill
Chair of the Board

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Reasonable taxes, fees and regulations

Balancing constrained, and in some cases declining, revenue resources with ongoing and growing expenses can be difficult. The implementation of and responsibility for taxes must be spread fairly throughout the community so businesses are not unduly burdened. Excessive taxation by the Town will only lead to business migration out of the Town to more business friendly communities. Any taxes, fees or regulations imposed on businesses must be necessary, reasonable, and not be a deterrent to competition with other communities. We do want to recognize and commend the Town staff for its recent efforts to decrease and streamline the requirements on businesses, particularly in the area of signage. To continue this focus, we provide the following:

- **Town Budget** – With the failure of the local sales tax proposition the Chamber urges the Council to continue to identify efficiencies and cost savings in an effort to reduce Town expenses as soon as possible. In addition, the Town must look for new ways to increase revenues through a foundation of business growth not by placing an undue burden on local businesses through increased fees. Several suggestions are discussed under the long-term strategic planning section of these priorities. We appreciate the Town’s history of reducing taxes as evidenced in the property tax rate decrease and their efforts to keep Town services efficient and cost effective.

- **Understanding the difference between Business Registration and Business Licenses** -
 - Business registration allows the Town to best know the types and number of companies doing business in Gilbert; while a business license is a more regulatory process that entails a lengthy background process and annual approval to continue doing business in Gilbert;
 - We believe the current process of an annual business registration is effective in identifying the types of businesses within our community;
 - We believe there are certain types of businesses that should be licensed based on the type of business and its risk on the public safety for the community;
 - We do not believe that all businesses should be licensed.

- **Business fees and permits** – The Chamber is supportive of a unified business fees application/process; however, we would like to share our perspective on some issues that may come before you:
 - We believe the annual application should be available on-line with trigger questions that would allow a business to understand if they should be licensed or have other items they must complete; understanding that certain items may not be applicable to all businesses. It should also allow for credit card payment on-line;

- We do not believe all businesses require an annual fire inspection; however, if a business falls into a category based on risk assessment requires an inspection then a reasonable fee for those businesses is acceptable. All businesses should not be charged a fee to receive a fire inspection when not needed;
- We encourage the Town to evaluate the opportunity to make installment payments on larger sums owed due to specific licensing or other fees.

➤ Signage

- Temporary signage is crucial to small businesses, especially during these rough economic times. Visibility can mean the difference between a successful business and one that closes its doors. We support changes to the current sign code that include:
 - Larger A-Frame Signs
 - Addition of Flying Banner Signs
 - Increasing the maximum combined number of these two signs is increased to three per business (no more than one on each street frontage and the others in the parking area)
 - Allowing businesses located in Business Parks to use A-Frame/Flying Banner signs if their business is up to 30,000 sq. ft.; those in commercial and office zoned areas will remain at 10,000 sq. ft.
 - Addition of short-term sales events temporary sign options.
 - We support an on-line notification process of temporary signage uses in lieu of a permit. If a fee is required it should be minimal and payable on-line.
 - We understand the amount of resources needed to monitor the compliance of sign permits and recommend that temporary signage compliance be handled on a complaint basis versus inspection.
 - We support re-evaluating the effectiveness of these changes in 18 months; however, we recommend it be done through a formal review deadline and not by stipulating an absolute sunset clause date.
 - Special thanks to the Town staff for their willingness to find solutions to help our businesses.
- Special Event signage – we support evaluating the definition of special events and short-term sales events as it pertains to the municipal code and look forward to participating in that process.
- As technologies advance we believe a review of permanent signage may be in order and look forward to assisting the Town with this issue as well.

Efficiencies

- **Technology** - One of the most effective ways to increase efficiencies is to invest in technology improvements without adding scope. Allowing customers to easily access information on-line, complete applications, permitting, notifications, and make payments will save the Town substantial time and resources for the long-term, as well as making it much easier for businesses to interact with the Town.
 - Online fillable forms with payment options
 - Easy to understand/accessibility on Town's website for business assistance, forms, fees
 - Automation of registration processes

- **Small business assistance**
 - We applaud the creation of the small business ombudsman and encourage other opportunities to assist smaller businesses best understand the Town's processes and requirements.
 - We recommend the Town Council continue its support for the various Business Links (a partnership between the Town and Gilbert Chamber) programs:
 - Front Runner program
 - Shop Gilbert program
 - On-line and printed brochures to help small businesses
 - Educational forums

- **Streamlined permitting processes** - We support the Town's efforts to review and enhance turnaround times of the entitlement, permit, inspection, certificate of occupancy processes.
 - Surveys conducted by an outside source allow for unbiased and frank disclosure from customers that will help in fine tuning these processes.
 - Technology investment is important to this area as well.

- **Business access during street maintenance/construction** - We appreciate the Town's efforts to provide additional visibility and access signage for businesses during construction, as well as, the public meetings with business owners during construction.
 - However, we would like the Council to consider meeting with businesses impacted by the construction prior to the contract being let to possibly modify hours of closures, timing, and routing. We'd recommend balancing the cost of construction work at night with the impact of closures during the day. We also encourage the removal of road barricades and cones as soon as possible when work is not being accomplished;
 - We support the Town's providing incentives for early completion of projects.

Long-term Strategic Planning

- **Long-term policy direction** – We encourage the Town Council to provide clear long-term policy decisions and policy direction to Town staff. These policy decisions will serve as the basis for changes within the Town structure dealing with infrastructure, service areas, and public safety for the future. Strategic partnerships will be crucial to accomplishing the long-term vision for sustainability and responsible management of limited resources.

- **Economic Attraction and Retention** – Long-term strategic planning should include an aggressive business development model as its foundation for long-term sustainability.
 - We urge the Town Council to develop a long-term strategy for attracting and retaining businesses in Gilbert.
 - We encourage the Town Council to adequately fund the Business Development department. Equip them with the tools needed to focus on attracting quality companies that in turn will bring high-wage jobs and significant capital investment to our community.
 - We support the Town’s emphasis on attracting STEM industries.
 - We encourage the Town Council to include business development updates at quarterly retreats.
 - Gilbert has a history of successful business start-ups and we encourage the Council to support efforts to help Gilbert businesses grow and stay in Gilbert; including programs such as our “Partners for Progress” series offered by the Chamber and the Front Runner program we partner with the Town.

- **Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport** will continue to serve as a major economic driver for Gilbert and our neighboring communities. We support the Town’s investment in the airport and focusing business development efforts to capture our share of that market.

- **Long-term strategic planning** is even more crucial as we approach build-out; we don’t have the luxury of a “do over.”
 - **General Plan Update** – Congratulations on being one of the only communities in Arizona to start the general plan process early and incorporating such a comprehensive public input process.
 - **Protecting employment zoning** – A lot of work went into establishing employment corridors throughout the community and we urge the Town Council to be vigilant in protecting this zoning as it is critical to long-term sustainability.

- Environmental stewards – We support the Town serving as a model for environmental stewardship and incentivizing businesses and residents to do so as well.
 - Water resources - The current plan for providing water infrastructure to the Town seems to be adequate for build-out. The ability to buy water rights in the future and replenish ground water quickly is of bigger concern. We recommend the Town continue its current effort to secure water rights and to consider future water needs as decisions are made about land use, height, and types of development.
 - Transportation – Connectivity and investment in street maintenance is vital to a healthy business environment.
 - Invest in multi-modal options to connect customers and employees to businesses.
 - Stay engaged with the expansion of HOV lanes along the SanTan Freeway as well as connections to Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport.
 - Continue to be involved in regional transportation and connectivity discussions.
 - Support connectivity to light-rail and Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport.
- Quarterly budget updates - We encourage the Town Council to incorporate budget updates and policy discussions as part of their quarterly retreats. Issues raised this past year could well-serve as a benchmark for information the Council needs to make good, long-term policy decisions that would allow the Town’s management team to budget accordingly. If the situation were to occur that revenues projections fall short again, we recommend a side-by-side budget be prepared earlier to allow the public to easily understand the options on the table. These side-by-side type budget discussions should also include replacement and other fund balances along with any policy decisions that may need to be updated regarding transfers or immediate needs.
- Tourism Promotion - With the number of hotels opening along the freeway and close to the SanTan Mall and Mesa-Phoenix Gateway Airport; the Chamber has been asked by our members what the bed tax will be used for and will it help to promote visitors to stay in Gilbert. The Chamber has established a Tourism committee and is supportive of investing in tourism promotion as outlined in its 5-year strategic plan. Attracting visitors brings outside dollars into our community and supports our local businesses. We believe the potential for millions of dollars to flow into the Town’s general fund budget warrants an investment to ensure success. The Town needs to have an aggressive strategy for promoting tourism to the Town and for supporting efforts by the Chamber and the town hotels and restaurants in this area.

- Redevelopment and infill projects – As Gilbert reaches build-out we will be faced with an inventory of declining properties as well as small vacant parcels. We encourage sound policies that will define quality development that fits well with surrounding projects. We also support the investment in the Heritage District to create a unique destination center celebrating our history.