

Old Town New Again

Have ideas for improving Scottsdale? The city is drafting a plan for its future, so now's the time to speak up.

TEN YEARS AGO, the collective voice spoke loud and clear: Scottsdale citizens wanted more open space, and they wanted urban areas to be more environmentally friendly.

Through a community outreach process called CityShape 2020, hundreds of citizens collaborated with the city government to draft the 2001 General Plan. Miraculous as it may seem, the government delivered. Scottsdale became the first city in the nation to require that its new city buildings be LEED gold certified, and 40 percent of its land is now dedicated to open space.

Now, Scottsdale is drafting the 2011 General Plan – following a state mandate for all cities to update their plan every 10 years – and as senior planner Carrie Wilhelme says, “Now is the time to speak up on what you want the city to become.”

The General Plan is an outline of a city’s vision for the next 10 to 20 years, covering aspects including public services, land uses and economic vitality. Every time boards, commissions and government officials make decisions, they are supposed to refer to the General Plan.

A recession seems an appropriate time to look to the future and reboot. Scottsdale’s bread-and-butter industries – tourism and food – are struggling, with resorts slipping in and out of foreclosure and downtown restaurants playing a round of musical chairs that has left many out of the game. Education and tourism are losing state funding, and Scottsdale has, at times, struggled with image, receiving more attention for its residents’ face-lifts than praise for its cityscape facelifts.

Perhaps that will change as future goals are met. Responding in part to a community survey conducted in 2009, Scottsdale’s new General Plan will continue to promote increasing open space (the city recently added 400 acres to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve), revitalizing south Scottsdale, streamlining energy and water use (the city is already in the process of switching to eco-friendly materials and buying locally), and creating community gardens and more farmers’ markets.

The downtown Scottsdale plan’s goals include developing a pedestrian-friendly,

“park once” environment with covered walkways and shade features; linking the downtown transit circulator to regional transit service; creating an art-filled “museum without walls” where everyone can participate; encouraging street vendors and entertainers; supporting locally owned small businesses; and promoting architecture that reflects the Old West and Sonoran Desert but also innovative urban design.

Scottsdale city planners also recently met with Scottsdale Community College president Dr. Jan Gehler and representatives from ASU SkySong in an effort to boost the General Plan’s emphasis on education, an area that has previously been given short shrift.

In addition, the focus on the new General Plan will shift from large-scale development to revitalization of existing neighborhoods, mostly because there isn’t much more land to develop, and the government doesn’t have much money, Wilhelme says. That means that the city is encouraging citizen-driven initiatives to revamp their neighborhoods by proposing projects such as public art, community gardens, and improved signage and lighting.

“We would love people in this community to champion some of those grassroots efforts,” says city spokeswoman Jan Horne. “Scottsdale is historically known as a community where citizens drive what they want this community to be.”

“The city will do what it can to help,” Wilhelme says, “but it’s up to citizens to initiate.”

Planners are meeting twice monthly to write the plan and will have the first draft ready by September, after which it will go through an extensive public input and amendment process before going to the City Council in October 2011. Wilhelme says city planners encourage suggestions from residents or visitors, now or after the draft is ready, and in any form: phone, e-mail, snail mail, Facebook. They’ll even meet with homeowners’ associations or service groups.

“If they want us to come to them we are more than happy to do so,” Wilhelme says. “Now is the time to have the discussion and to think into the future.”

For more information, visit www.scottsdale-az.gov/generalplan/update.asp.

— Keridwen Cornelius

