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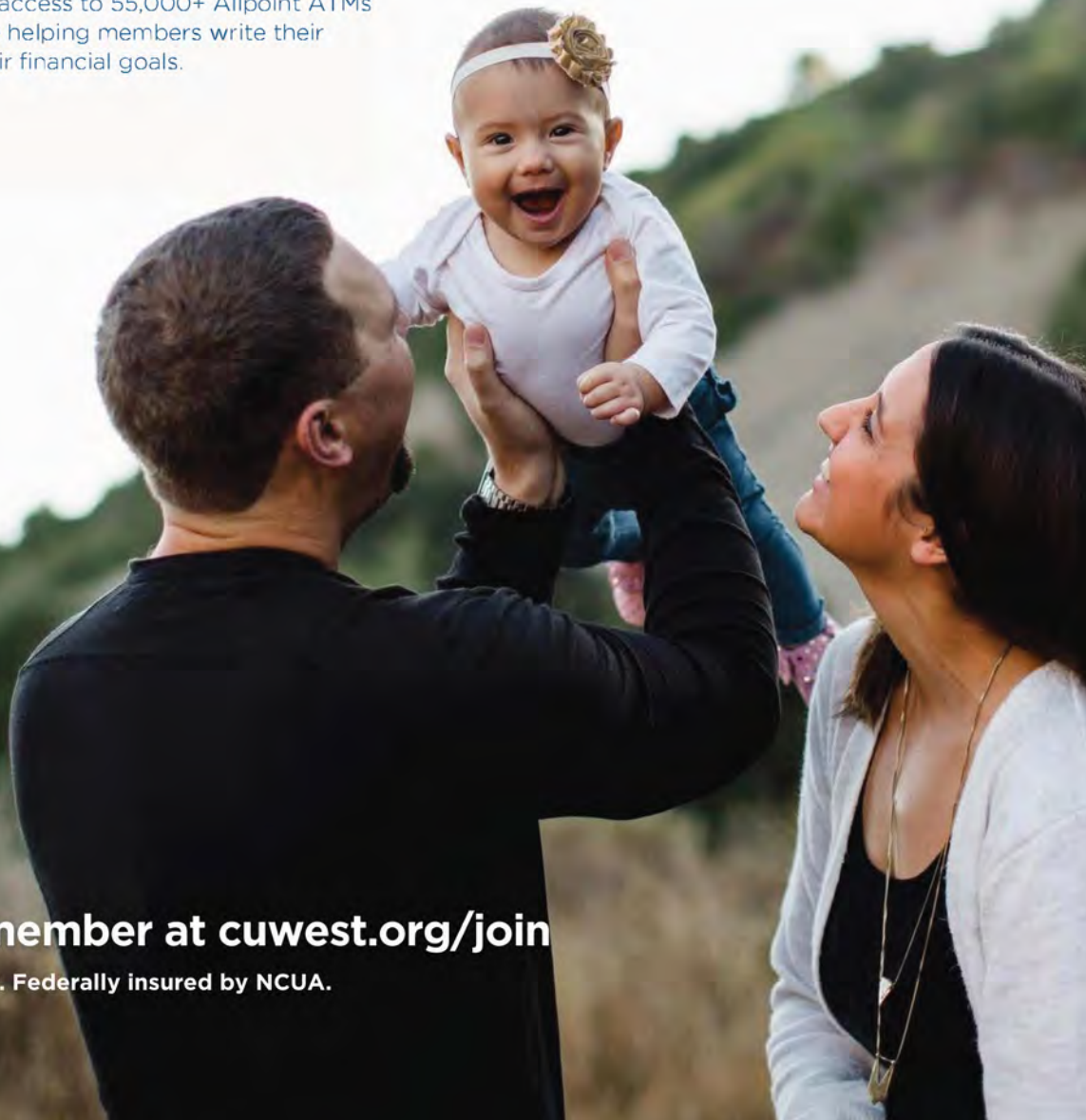
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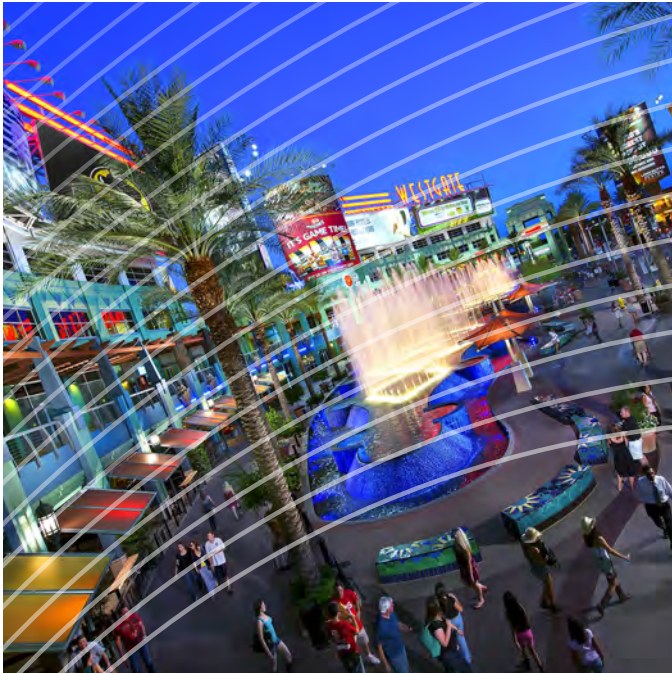
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THE NEW WEST VALLEY

The perception of the region has evolved into one of a vibrant and growing community that is fostering innovation and driving economic growth

By MICHAEL GOSSIE

Buckeye Mayor Eric Orsborn recounts a 2015 story that perfectly illustrates how the perception of the West Valley has dramatically evolved in less than a decade.

“Then-Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton was celebrating an investment the City of Phoenix was making in Buckeye,” Orsborn recalls. “Mayor Stanton said, ‘One day, we’re all going to be suburbs of Buckeye.’ And everyone laughed because — at that time — it was funny to hear the mayor of Phoenix say something like that.”

But Buckeye might get the last laugh.

Orsborn points out that Phoenix is about 525 square miles.

Buckeye is 640 square miles with the potential to add more. The 37,000-acre master-planned community Teravalis has broken ground in Buckeye and promises to bring 100,000 new homes and 300,000 residents. Bill Gates also plans to build a “smart city” on 25,000 acres of land in the city. And with thousands of new jobs coming to Buckeye annually, the once-tiny West Valley city — which the Census Bureau says was America’s fastest-growing city over the past five years — is no longer playing second-fiddle to its bigger neighbor to the east.

“Buckeye WILL be bigger than Phoenix,” Orsborn says, matter-of-factly.



About WESTMARC

What it is: WESTMARC — the Western Maricopa Coalition — is a public-private partnership of 15 communities, the business community and the educational sector in the West Valley of the Greater Phoenix region. WESTMARC was formed in 1990 to address important issues facing the West Valley’s economic prosperity. Through WESTMARC members’ connections, collaboration and action, the region is now home to 1.8 million residents, a thriving business community, abundance of education options and world-class sports and entertainment amenities.

Learn more: westmarc.org

But it’s not just Buckeye that is emerging from the shadow of Phoenix. The entire West Valley has evolved from being a region once perceived as a farming community and retirement destination into one of the world’s economic development hot spots, attracting billions of dollars in investment, fostering an environment of innovation, attracting technology giants and becoming the go-to destination in Arizona for new residents to call home and businesses looking to start, grow or expand operations.

“The perception used to primarily be that the West Valley was a place that mostly offered tremendous affordability benefiting

either retirees or lower-income, lower-skilled workers,” says Jeanine Jerkovic, economic development director for the City of Surprise. “While businesses might appreciate the affordability, the low-skill workforce perception presented barriers for major business operations in need of a talented workforce.”

But that perception has changed — dramatically.

“The West Valley’s great strength is its ability to reinvent itself and create a balanced offering of a variety of culture, development, open space and business opportunity,” says Jason Morris, founding partner of Withey Morris Baugh. “Bear in mind there are over a

WESTMARC

million West Valley residents who are ‘new’ to the Valley and have no concept of any negative connotation associated with that area. All they see is a new and thriving frontier, which they want to claim.”

Today, Jerkovic says the true vision of the West Valley has come into clearer focus: It’s an up-and-coming place of abundance that is growing with new young families, students, visitors and talented professionals.

“Over the last 10 years, we have watched the West Valley transform from farming communities to the leader in foreign direct investment, manufacturing and consistent residential and commercial growth and development,” says Matt Carpenter, chief operating officer, senior vice president and partner at Haydon. “The West Valley has become a hot spot and example for growth strategy.”

Redefining a region

Sintra Hoffman, president and CEO of WESTMARC, a public-private partnership of 15 West Valley communities, says the region’s rapid growth has been a major factor in what has helped redefine it.

“One of the fortunate things we have going on in the West Valley is there are a lot of newcomers,” Hoffman says. “There are 200 or 300 new people a day that move to the Metro Phoenix area. So, there are a lot of newcomers coming to the West Valley that don’t have those old perceptions. They are seeing the area for what it is today. We often hear people say, ‘Everything’s new.’ We have new housing, new communities, new retail. Everything is a little bit more spacious. We’re not as congested. We’re not as old. The impact of having so many new people — especially young people move into the area — has been really positive for

us and we’ve been able to build upon that.”

Along that line of thought, Hoffman has seen a huge shift in the perception of the West Valley, specifically in the area of age.

“I think at one point, we were very much branded a retirement community,” Hoffman says. “But there are two things that have really demonstrated a shift in demographics.”

The first, Hoffman says, is Phoenix Children’s and Banner Health investing hundreds of millions of dollars to build new West Valley pediatric facilities to serve the region.

“They don’t do these things lightly,” Hoffman says. “Clearly, they see not only the market today, but the market of the future and they are looking at the changing demographics and the evolution of the West Valley.”

Rising in the west

The second milestone Hoffman has seen is in educational opportunities.

“When ASU expanded its West Valley campus, it signified a major shift,” Hoffman says. “For almost 40 years, ASU West Valley had been a campus for lifelong learning. It was more liberal arts and catered towards the older population.”

But in 2023, ASU’s West Valley campus opened up three new schools — The School of Technology, Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the W. P. Carey School of Business; The School of Interdisciplinary Forensics in the New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences; and The School of Integrated Engineering in the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering.

“The West Valley is already home to many engineering and tech employers, with massive growth and investment on the horizon,” says Associate Professor Shawn Jordan, the interim director at the School of Integrated Engineering. “That’s one of the main reasons

RETAIL THERAPY: “From a retail perspective, the new dining and shopping developments at both the Village at Prasada and Prasada North have been a game-changer,” says Jeanine Jerkovic, economic development director for the City of Surprise. “Our traffic and household income numbers rival those along the Desert Ridge corridor of the Loop 101, and they’re only growing.” (Rendering provided by Village at Prasada)



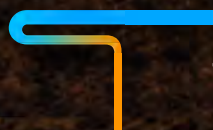
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Matt Carpenter



Sintra Hoffman



Jeanine Jerkovic



Shawn Jordan



Tucker Macon



Jason Morris



Eric Orsborn



Kevin Phelps



Joe Pizzillo



Jennifer Stein

ASU wants to help bring engineering here. We want to support current and future students to study engineering close to where they live and make an impact in their communities.”

Hoffman says the shift came after ASU asked West Valley leadership for feedback.

“We had a workforce development strategy — West Valley Pipeline,” Hoffman says, “so we were able to give them information on what the in-demand occupations are today and projected into the future.”

ASU, in turn, realigned its curriculum to match the needs of the workforce.

“When ASU no longer saw the West Valley as a retirement community and realized they needed to shift gears and make a significant investment, that was a big telltale sign for me,” Hoffman says. “These things showed me we are getting more specialty services — healthcare and education — that are geared towards that younger population that is helping us build the workforce we need for future growth. That’s a major shift for the West Valley.”

Team sport

If you ask Hoffman or other West Valley leaders what propelled the region into becoming the economic juggernaut it is today, they universally agree that it’s not one victory or the success of one organization. It’s the collective effort of the region.

“Our West Valley mayors and managers are a very congenial, collaborative group,” says Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo. “We know that what is good for one city benefits the entire region, so we celebrate each other’s wins. We share best practices, ask one another what has worked — or didn’t work — in each of our cities

so that we don’t have to reinvent the wheel when we are tackling an issue. We are all growing at an incredible rate, so having that positive working relationship brings a cohesiveness that has us all moving in the same direction to the benefit of each community and the region as a whole.”

And that cohesiveness has helped the region score some major wins when it comes to economic development. Among the highlights:

- TSMC is investing more than \$65 billion in three greenfield fabs in Phoenix. TSMC will create approximately 6,000 direct manufacturing jobs, more than 20,000 accumulated unique construction jobs and tens of thousands of indirect jobs in this decade.
- Amkor Technology, a leading provider of semiconductor packaging and test services, plans to build an advanced packaging and test facility in Peoria. Amkor plans to invest approximately \$2 billion and employ approximately 2,000 people at the new facility.
- KORE Power is building an \$850 million battery cell manufacturing facility in Buckeye that will create nearly 2,000 new jobs.
- Microsoft recently paid more than \$258 million to acquire 280 acres in the El Mirage area to support data center construction that’s already underway in the area.

“When TSMC announced it was investing in the West Valley, it proved our workforce,” says Jennifer Stein, economic development services director for the City of Peoria. “It showed we have a really talented, highly educated workforce. We are not being overlooked anymore. The West Valley is actually a leader in economic development.”



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Every jobs counts

But it's not just the big-dollar investments that have shifted the perception of the West Valley. Cities in the region have cultivated an environment where startups can find a supportive and welcoming environment to launch and grow their businesses.

"There are three incubators that have helped startups grow in the West Valley — AZ TechCelerator in Surprise; Canyon Ventures at Grand Canyon University; and Peoria Forward, which is a partnership between the ASU Entrepreneurship and Innovation Program and the City of Peoria," Hoffman says. "They are doing a great job of providing basic resources, giving startups incubator space, allowing them to learn from each other and to grow and scale their businesses."

According to the West Valley Innovation Alliance, 139 new businesses have been created in the West Valley in the past 38 months. And in the technology space, the number of new startups in the West Valley is growing an astounding 34% each year.

"We were able to assist 47 entrepreneurs with their business plans, funding and strengthening the ecosystem of the West Valley," says Ron Babich, co-founder of the West Valley Innovation Alliance.

Those 47 startups have attracted funding value of \$18.7 million and created 278 new jobs. Experts say this ecosystem of innovation and growth is only happening because people have finally taken notice of the opportunities available in the West Valley.

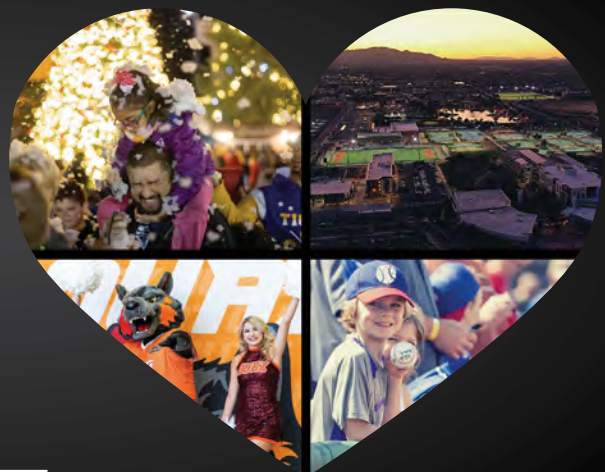
AN EDUCATED WORKFORCE: Artist rendering of Casa De Oro II, a new dorm to be built on the ASU West Valley campus. (Rendering provided by Todd and Associates/Oakland Construction Company)



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“West Valley leadership has done a better job of telling our story and creating market clarity over the last few years — something we have all had to do during the last cycle of industrial, commercial, and residential hyper-growth,” Jerkovic says. “WESTMARC has done a consistently excellent job of communicating new market information and convening West Valley leadership to accelerate new market information.”

More to come

Moving into the future, the West Valley’s greatest strength is that it is still growing and evolving and creating its own identity.

“In the City of Surprise, we have added more than 5,000 people to our community each year for four years and consequently have seen our median household income rise from \$65,000 to \$97,000 and the median age in our city drop from 41 to 38,” Jerkovic says. “An increasingly new affluent and young demographic is changing our workforce, visitor and consumer profile — and this is an exciting opportunity for new developments and businesses.”

Jerkovic points to the fact that there are few places in the nation where all types of development — industrial, commercial and residential — are all in growth-mode, but they all are growing in the West Valley. And success breeds more success.

“Attracting Red Bull, Rausch and Ball to a multi-million-square-foot campus in the Loop 303 area was an eye opener for many in the region,” says Kevin Phelps, city manager for the City of

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Glendale. “That soon led to billion-dollar investments by White Claw and Nestle. These projects were a huge catalyst for the significant growth in manufacturing and industrial projects. But ultimately, VAI Resort will bring unprecedented attention to Glendale nationally when it opens next year.”

And while the gigantic West Valley industrial deals and the \$1 billion VAI Resort grab a lot of headlines, there are other major retail and hospitality projects — Verrado Marketplace in Buckeye, The Trailhead in Peoria, Mattel Adventure Park in Glendale, Village at Prasada and Prasada North in Surprise — that are also contributing the the changing face of the West Valley.

“Buc-ee’s, of course, is huge,” Pizzillo says of the the 75,400-square-foot, 120-gas-pump convenience store known for its sandwiches, freshly made fudge and hot beef brisket. “They have an enormous following of faithful patrons. Buc-ee’s is a destination site, with people driving hours out of their way to visit their stores.

To have them come to Goodyear is definitely a big win.”

Pizzillo is quick to point out that Goodyear is also expanding its medical corridor.

“We have two of the biggest names in cancer research and treatment now in Goodyear,” he says. “City of Hope (formerly Cancer Treatment Centers of America) has just broken ground on a major expansion and renovation at its Goodyear facility, and Ironwood Cancer and Research Center just opened its largest facility in Goodyear. Add to that, Abrazo West in Goodyear is also undergoing a major expansion. All this activity means our West Valley residents will have access to high-quality care closer to home and that definitely is a game-changer.”

The future is bright

Beyond all the transformative economic development wins and population growth, the evolution of the West Valley from quiet retirement

DID YOU KNOW?

70%

of the West Valley workforce commutes east for professional employment.

\$75,566

is the average annual income for households in the West Valley.



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We see space to make connections.

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community to innovative powerhouse comes down to the several key strengths that position the region for continued success in the future.

“First, the West Valley’s strategic location, situated at the crossroads of major transportation routes and adjacent to bustling urban centers, provides access to markets and resources,” says Tucker Macon, project director at Sundt, which has been involved in several projects in the West Valley that have the potential to be game-changers for the region. “Additionally, the region has a diverse and skilled workforce, coupled with a collaborative and supportive business environment. Moreover, the West Valley has demonstrated commitment to investing in infrastructure, education and sustainable development, which further amplifies its potential for long-term economic prosperity.”

Another factor driving economic growth into the future is the West Valley’s vast amount of available land and its robust transportation network.

“Transportation initiatives, including ongoing improvements to Interstate 10, State Route 85, Loop 303, the future Interstate 11 and investments in State Route 30 will enhance accessibility and connectivity within the region,” Orsborn says. “For Buckeye in particular, our extensive rail corridors offer logistical advantages for businesses engaged in advanced manufacturing, transportation and logistics. Together, these strengths position the West Valley — and Buckeye — as a future hub for innovation and economic advancement.”

But the bottom line is what has truly fueled the transformation of the West Valley has been its “open for business” attitude and the collective passion West Valley leaders have for the region and their willingness to work collaboratively to advance it.

“This is our moment,” Pizzillo says. “The West Valley has been waiting for the spotlight to shine this way and now that it is here, we are ready for it.” **AB**

40%

of Phoenix residents live west of Interstate 17.

1.8 million

people live in the West Valley.

63.5%

of the West Valley population is workforce age.



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A DIFFERENT

VIEW

Here's how West Valley cities have helped turn the region into a hot spot for growth and innovation

By MICHAEL GOSSIE

Ten years ago, many people made the West Valley their second, third or fourth choice when locating businesses and development, according to Jason Morris, founding partner of Withey Morris Baugh.

“Clearly, a decade later, we see it as the No. 1 choice in many categories,” Baugh says. “This is due in large part to major infrastructure projects which created the backbone for successful development.”

In addition, the population growth, education choices and significant employers really shifted people's perceptions."

So, what did the West Valley do right to change those perceptions? Az Business asked West Valley leaders how their cities helped shape a region that has quickly become known for its rapid growth and innovation. Here's what they had to say:

Eric Orsborn, mayor, City of Buckeye:

"With almost 10 million square feet of active development occurring across the city, Buckeye is a major player in changing the perception of the West Valley. The growth seen across the city represents high-paying employers in manufacturing, logistics, healthcare, retail and services. These developments bring in brands such as Kore Power, Funko, Rehrig Pacific Company, Vestar, Banner Health and Abrazo. As these powerful brands continue to invest in Buckeye and the West Valley, it brings notoriety and changes the vision of the community and region. In order to attract these types of private industries, Buckeye has streamlined our development process, ensuring we're meeting time to market goals and private industry needs. These efforts, combined with our population growth and infrastructure investments, have reshaped the community and in turn are part of changing the West Valley's image."

Kevin Phelps, city manager, City of Glendale: "It starts with leveraging our assets. But most importantly, we haven't just talked about where we are going, we have produced tangible evidence of where we are and where we are going. To paraphrase one of my favorite slogans, 'What you do speaks so loud I can't hear what you are saying.' In other words, the City of Glendale didn't just talk about success, we went out and produced success."

Joe Pizzillo, mayor, City of Goodyear:

"It is a multi-pronged approach in just about every operational area. Our council and executive leadership have been very intentional, employing highly focused strategies that support the business environment in the West Valley. Our team has worked hard to increase efficiencies in every step of the development process. We work diligently to maintain the aesthetic appeal of our city through design guidelines and by having a stable approach to growth, which balances community needs with development impacts. We prioritize amenities such as our parks and recreation facilities. Although we are growing, we continue to offer opportunities that foster a true sense of community for our residents. We fund major events that promote connectedness and a 'small town' feel."

Jeanine Jerkovic, economic development director, City of Surprise:

"Luxury or high-end retail brands and restaurants used to be rare west of 83rd Avenue. Surprise made a deliberate decision to curate unique lifestyle corridors in key areas of the community that are starting to come to fruition today. Today, the Loop 303 extends 35 miles from the I-10 to the I-17, and a three-mile stretch of the Loop 303 in Surprise offers the corridor's only retail-lifestyle-quality of life amenities, drawing in a wide range of retail and restaurant visits to the City of Surprise from throughout the West Valley. Following the opening of the Surprise Costco in September of 2020, restaurant concepts like Cooper's Hawk, Firebirds and Barrio Queen and highly desired retailers like Total Wine & More, Hobby Lobby and American Furniture Warehouse could be convinced to locate to Surprise, and these new exciting amenities are dramatically shifting market perceptions of our city and the entire West Valley." **AB**



Jeanine Jerkovic



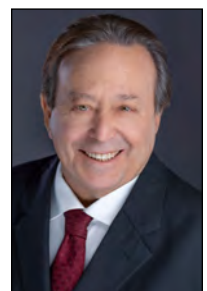
Jason Morris



Eric Orsborn



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EDUCATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY

Here's how West Valley educators are innovating and evolving to help students succeed as part of the workforce of the future

By MICHAEL GOSSIE

In case you missed it, the best high school in the country is in the West Valley.

Out of nearly 25,000 schools assessed by U.S. News & World Report for its 2024 rankings, BASIS Peoria, which opened in 2011 and serves middle school and high school students, was ranked No. 1 in the nation.

"It's an incredible campus," says BASIS Educational Ventures Co-Chairman Patti

Bezanson. "BASIS Peoria does great things; that's always been the case. This year, those great things were better than any other campus in America."

But BASIS Peoria isn't the only West Valley educational institution doing great things and impacting students and the community. The West Valley education ecosystem is fostering innovation in

education by embracing technology, personalized learning and hands-on experiences to fundamentally change the way students are prepared to enter the workforce. By integrating cutting-edge tools and methodologies, West Valley educators are empowering students to think critically, problem-solve creatively and adapt to a rapidly evolving world. And,



MAKING THE GRADE: “In addition to traditional academic skills, our Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs emphasize durable skills development such as problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity, as well as character skills like fortitude, growth mindset and leadership,” says Peoria Unified School District Superintendent Dr. KC Somers. “These skills will serve all Peoria Unified students well, regardless of what career pathway they choose.” (Photo provided by Peoria Unified School District)

“As businesses build strategic partnerships with educational districts like West-MEC,” Spurgeon says, “this will foster student career pathway opportunities and move them toward economic independence.”

Preparing for the future

Experts say the West Valley’s greatest strength in building the workforce of the future lies in its commitment to meeting the needs of its growing population head-on.

“Our Arizona-based, hybrid, 24-month Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS) program is designed to prepare PAs to provide compassionate care with the highest level of clinical excellence and ethical standards,” says Mable Smith, Ph.D., JD, MN, NEA-BC, interim dean, College of Health & Natural Sciences at Franklin Pierce University, which has a campus in Goodyear. “We develop PAs who are patient advocates, critical thinkers and lifelong learners. We nurture the development of culturally sensitive leaders who embrace diversity, equity and inclusion to serve patients within their communities, where they are ideally positioned to meet local employers’ needs and contribute to regional healthcare services.”

Being able to meet those employers’ demands is critical to both the future success of students and the continued economic growth of the West Valley.

“Grand Canyon University prepares students for the workforce by creating educational opportunities that meet the needs of the student and industry leaders,” says Paul Lambertson, dean of GCU’s College of Engineering and Technology. “The university continually assesses the economy and partners with more than 500 industry leaders on our advisory boards to align our curriculum to meet their needs.”

As part of that effort, GCU launched the Center for Workforce Development, which encompasses the university’s

Pre-Apprenticeship for Electricians and a new Computer Numerical Control (CNC) Machinist Pathway.

“This accelerated pathway model is making an impact on the state by helping high-demand industries fill needed positions while also adapting to today’s student and leading them to life-changing careers,” Lambertson says.

The goal is a career

Making sure West Valley students are on that fast track to lucrative careers marks a shift from the traditional approach of education institutions.

“Going back years ago, educators developed their curriculum and marketed that curriculum to students and then those students graduated with a lot of debt and maybe a job, maybe not a job,” says Sintra Hoffman, president and CEO of WESTMARC. “That approach has dramatically changed. As part of West Valley Pipeline, which is our workforce development strategy, we bring in industry partners and education partners and they are able to have a dialogue and say, ‘This is what I needed in terms of skill set and education.’”

Hoffman says educators have stepped up, listened to the needs of employers, looked at job descriptions and started working from skill-based needs to figure out their education programs and shape their curriculum.

“Glendale Community College has renewed its focus on meeting the needs of the West Valley,” says Tiffany Hernandez, PhD, JD, president of Glendale Community College. “We are achieving this by being agile and listening to our business partners, students and our community. In working alongside these groups, GCC is putting greater focus on post-completion success and job placement. Just as our students learn from us, we are constantly learning from our workforce partners to understand what skills are needed for employees to thrive in their positions and businesses to be successful.”

in doing so, they are creating a skilled and adaptable future workforce for employers looking to relocate or expand in the West Valley.

“The West Valley’s greatest strength is the rapid growth of companies that are seeking a skilled workforce and the wide range of incoming talent to feed this pipeline,” says Dr. Scott Spurgeon, superintendent at West-MEC, a public school district that provides innovative Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. “Countless businesses are establishing operations in the West Valley as they realize the potential of our geographic footprint.”

Next school year, Spurgeon says West-MEC will train students in 33 programs that are in the fields of architecture and construction; health science; human services; information technology; law and public safety; manufacturing; STEM; and transportation, distribution and logistics. In case you missed the headlines: Those are all business sectors the are growing and flourishing in the West Valley.



Patti Bezanson



Tiffany Hernandez



Sintra Hoffman



Paul Lambertson



Jessica Roper



Mable Smith



KC Somers



Scott Spurgeon



Trey Terry

But innovative West Valley educators aren't waiting until students get older to put them on a prosperous career path.

At the Agua Fria High School District, educators and local businesses are teaming up to help students pave a pathway to success from early on. Agua Fria's "Academies" provide robust, tailored academic experiences for students to explore high-wage, in-demand careers and understand the education, training and credentials needed to meet their career and college goals. Through partnerships with local businesses and aligning core classes like algebra, English, arts and history with workforce-focused experiences, students can apply classroom lessons with real-world expectations.

"The Academies will give every student extensive exposure to work-based learning that not only enriches their educational experience, but also strengthens the workforce of our cities, fostering economic growth and sustainability by cultivating a skilled and adaptable workforce," says Trey Terry, Agua Fria governing board member. "Our close collaboration with local businesses ensures our curriculum reflects the current standard in the workplace and what's expected in a collegiate setting."

The future is now

And back in Peoria, the Peoria Unified School District has taken a holistic approach to educating its students to prepare them to lead the future workforce.

"In addition to traditional academic skills, our CTE programs emphasize durable skills development such as problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity, as well as character skills like fortitude, growth mindset and leadership," says Superintendent KC Somers, PhD. "These skills will serve all Peoria Unified students well, regardless of what career pathway they choose. Students also have the opportunity to practice these durable skills and gain feedback from the industry, community and post-secondary stakeholders through project work, community service events, mock interviews, trials, role-plays and work-based learning engagements."

Those types of experiences go a long way in helping both students and employers achieve their goals, according to Jessica Roper, director of career services at University of Phoenix.

"For early career job seekers, gaining hands-on experience alongside your education and certifications is key for

building practical skills and enhancing your employability," she says. "Part-time jobs, internships, volunteer experiences and personal projects are all great opportunities to apply your theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios, helping you stand out to employers."

What really stands out is the ability for West Valley business leaders and educators to continue to innovate to meet the needs of the future workforce.

"The West Valley is a tight-knit community that comes together regularly to support educational initiatives," Somers says. "Volunteers offer assistance with mock interviews and classroom support, industry partners provide guest speaking for students and workshops for teachers, post-secondary partners offer students opportunities to begin earning college credits while still in high school, and community members participate in local events to help support student growth."

Experts agree that collaboration between West Valley businesses and educators is key to preparing the workforce. By aligning curriculum with industry needs and providing internships and mentorship programs, students gain relevant skills. Businesses offer real-world insight to shape educational programs to foster innovation and practical expertise. Together, they bridge the gap between education and industry to build a skilled workforce. All that adds up to a region with a vibrant economic future, both for its employers and for the people who live there.

"Having business at the table will make a significant impact on the workforce pipeline in the Southwest Valley," Hoffman says. "This will help propel the West Valley forward in a competitive fashion, attracting new businesses and creating excellent career opportunities for residents." **AB**

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HEAD OF THE CLASS

Here's what some innovative West Valley education institutions are doing to build the workforce of the future

By MICHAEL GOSSIE

Franklin Pierce University: “In November 2022, Franklin Pierce University launched its hybrid Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS) program at the Goodyear Academic Center,” says Mable Smith, Ph.D., JD, MN, NEA-BC, interim dean, College of Health & Natural Sciences at Franklin Pierce University. “This hybrid program is a critical element of our Pierce@60 strategic plan, emphasizing innovative teaching methods that resonate with the evolving demands of the healthcare marketplace. As one of the first online/hybrid PA programs in the country, students have the opportunity to complete their education more quickly and at a lower cost.”

Glendale Community College: “To meet the needs of this dynamic environment, GCC has created Fast Track Certificates, which are shorter term, stackable credentials that prepare students for quicker entry into the workforce, or to progress in their current career track,” says Tiffany Hernandez, Ph.D., JD, president of Glendale Community College. “GCC also realizes the importance of students getting real-world experience as part of their academic program. An example of this is the Gaucho Security Operations Center, where students receive training in cybersecurity and have the opportunity to apply their knowledge through a paid internship program that pairs them with rural municipalities in Arizona.”

Grand Canyon University: “The Center for Workforce Development’s innovative and flexible apprenticeships and non-degree programs create additional pathways for those who may not be able to obtain a four-year degree,” says Paul Lambertson, dean of GCU’s College of Engineering and Technology. “Combined with GCU’s current priority of educating teachers and nurses across the country through its ground and online baccalaureate and graduate programs, the university is bolstering Arizona’s workforce by addressing the ongoing labor shortages that plague not only the state, but the entire country. In fact, GCU has two West Valley Accelerated BS in Nursing locations as we partner with local healthcare systems to help the critical nursing shortage, as well as ABSN locations in Chandler and Tucson.”

Peoria Unified School District: “Peoria Unified works closely with many advisory board members to drive innovative CTE curriculum and produce personalized learning experiences that educate the workforce of tomorrow, especially in high-skill, high-demand jobs,” says Superintendent Dr. KC Somers. “Advisory board guidance has led to defining relevant certifications for students, offering new programs such as automation and robotics and extending our automotive program to include electric vehicle technology.”

West-MEC: “All West-MEC programs have a business advisory council that meets a few times a year to provide guidance on ensuring curriculum, equipment and credentials meet industry standards,” says Dr. Scott Spurgeon, superintendent at West-MEC. “West-MEC also works on the front end with companies that are building new facilities in the West Valley. Establishing early partnerships allows West-MEC to learn their technical skill needs in order to prepare students for pathways that fill their talent gap in the West Valley. Some recent key early business partnerships include Nestle, TSMC, and KORE Power.” [AB](#)



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ON THE GO

Here's how the West Valley has evolved into a year-round tourism destination

By DEVYN WILLIAMS

In the last decade, what was once a sleepy suburb has hosted two Super Bowls, four NASCAR Championship Weekends, a men's college basketball Final Four, the College Football Playoff National Championship, a Jake Paul fight, two classic UFC events, the Rolling Stones and Taylor Swift — twice.



Welcome to the West Valley — one of the nation's emerging hot spots for experience-based tourism.

"I see more energy around tourism in the West Valley than ever," says Sintra Hoffman, president and CEO of WESTMARC. "It used to be spring training. But hosting these mega-events has put the West Valley on a world-wide stage for the world to see. Now, people are looking at the West Valley as a year-round tourism destination."

And it's easy to see why.

"You can pack a bag, stay in the West Valley and capture a bit of it all — shopping, dining, entertainment, outdoor activities, arts and culture attractions, good weather and so much more," says Jessica Kubicki, marketing director at Westgate.

Tourism in the West Valley is only going to get bigger with the expected 2025 openings of the much-anticipated VAI Resort and Mattel Theme Park in Glendale.

Coming attractions

Imagine a \$1 billion, 60-acre resort oasis destination rising from the Arizona desert landscape. Imagine a hotel room transforming into a concert seat to view world-renowned artists and entertainers. Imagine an island escape inspired by the most exotic beaches in the world now set at the center of a resort destination. It takes a visionary to go beyond imagining and disrupt the status quo. But that's what the \$1 billion VAI Resort intends to do. Led by Grant Fisher, the 27-year-old hospitality entrepreneur, and the VAI Global Development team, VAI is the manifestation of a dream to create the world's most iconic resort in the most unexpected yet perfect location.

INDUSTRY-CHANGER: VAI Resort, which is expected to open in 2025 in Glendale, will redefine the concept of a full-service resort hotel by delivering a multi-faceted experience. With an overall design inspired by the sounds and rhythms of music, state-of-the-art entertainment venues, curated culinary concepts and a first-of-its-kind, live music and concert venue, VAI will live up to the spirit of the word which is described as: a behavior, a lifestyle. *(Rendering provided by VAI Global Development)*



Bridget Binsbacher



Latasha Causey



Sintra Hoffman



Jessica Kubicki



Kevin Phelps

“What I love most about VAI Resort is that it’s geared towards the younger generation as an experiential entertainment destination that will combine live entertainment, overnight accommodations, restaurants and daytime activities,” says Kevin Phelps, city manager of Glendale.

Some highlights:

- It will be the first hotel property to create a live music venue with rooms.
- It will feature four towers with more than 1,100 rooms, suites and villas.
- VAI music and entertainment venue features a \$40 million state-of-the-art stage.
- Entertainment options include 12 signature restaurants, Konos Island and Beach Oasis, luxury spa, nightclub venue, rides and attractions,

An addition that could potentially be in the works, according to Phelps, is an elevated 10-minute gondola ride that can take guests to the Desert Diamond Casino from VAI Resort.

Next door to VAI Resort is the Mattel Theme Park, which will feature a Hot Wheels Go Kart Track and a 4D Barbie Theater for an interactive guest experience.

“We think this will be a magnet for attracting visitors,” Phelps says.

Sports fans everywhere can rejoice because State Farm Stadium — which hosted the men’s Final Four in 2024 — will be hosting the women’s Final Four in 2026.

Arizonans will also get to experience their first-ever Buc-ee’s in 2025. The destination gas station will feature 120 gas pumps and a one-stop shop for clothing, food and more. According to the city of Goodyear, it will bring more than 200 jobs to the area and offer tourists another fun place to visit.

Westgate creates booming economy

When Westgate Entertainment District opened in 2006, it helped tourism in the

West Valley reach new heights — and it continues to do so. Not only is it home to Desert Diamond Arena — which hosts concerts, sporting events and other attractions — but Westgate also brings people together for dining, nightlife, shopping and socializing.

“The one-stop-shop is our mantra here,” Kubicki says.

Some fairly new attractions:

- Pop Stroke, a Tiger Woods-backed business, includes two 18-hole, high end, miniature golf courses along with great food and drinks.
 - Chicken N Pickle features indoor and outdoor pickleball courts and offers food, drinks, party rooms and TV sets.
- “We’re also getting ready to open a huge indoor Mario Andretti electric car facility in Westgate that will offer car driving, restaurants, bars and virtual reality games,” Phelps says.

As the West Valley looks to grow its ever-younger population, entertainment stems from multiple different activities within one place. They want their senses challenged and that is what Westgate is all about, Phelps says.

“It’s about layering all these different activities, so it becomes a no brainer to want to be in Glendale,” Phelps says.

With the uniqueness of Glendale and other parts of the West Valley, its experts see tourism continuing to thrive.

“I think we can do better than any other region in Arizona and better than everyone outside of Las Vegas and the Southwest U.S.,” Phelps says.

Sports fans unite and rejoice

According to an Arizona Sports and Tourism Authority spokesperson, State Farm Stadium in Glendale attracts 1.2 million people to about 200 events per year, generating an estimated \$7 billion in economic impact. The stadium will host three Copa America soccer matches this summer, which are expected to bring in tens of thousands of fans.

“You get out what you put in,” Kubicki says, “and the stakeholders of the West Valley have put a lot in. The sports appeal in general, from football to baseball to

college sports, creates a huge upside for the West Valley. Big events bring big events, which to state the very obvious, bring the masses.”

These mega-events have helped Glendale’s hospitality industry increase its hotel room count from 900 to 1,900 rooms in the last decade, with thousands more on the horizon, including more than 1,000 new rooms from VAI alone.

“When Taylor Swift kicked off her world tour in Glendale at the stadium, we renamed Glendale to Swift City for two days”, Phelps says. “People spent money at unheard rates because it wasn’t about the music, it was about being in a party with 80,000 people and being part of the experience.”

But what originally helped put the West Valley on the tourism map was the Cactus League baseball, which generates \$710 million in total economic impact and generates \$36.6 million in annual tax revenue.

“Six out of 10 fans come here for spring training and as a result, they visit other parts of the state and stay for an average of four days,” says Bridget Binsbacher, executive director of the Cactus League.

Spring training might be five weeks long, but Binsbacher says it is a year-round industry with festivals, signature events and other attractions for fans.

“The World Series win by the Texas Rangers helped them see a 42% increase in attendance,” Binsbacher says. “Our total attendance for 2024 was 1.6 million for 216 games, the highest attendance total since before the pandemic.

Another economic driver for West Valley tourism is Phoenix Raceway in Avondale, which hosts two races per year, including NASCAR Championship Weekend, the Super Bowl for NASCAR.

“The City of Avondale continues to bring new hotels and restaurants and the other West Valley cities are also continuing to invest and bring new things out here,” says Latasha Causey, president of Phoenix Raceway.

“There’s always something going on in the West Valley,” Hoffman says, “and it’s only going to keep getting better.” **AB**

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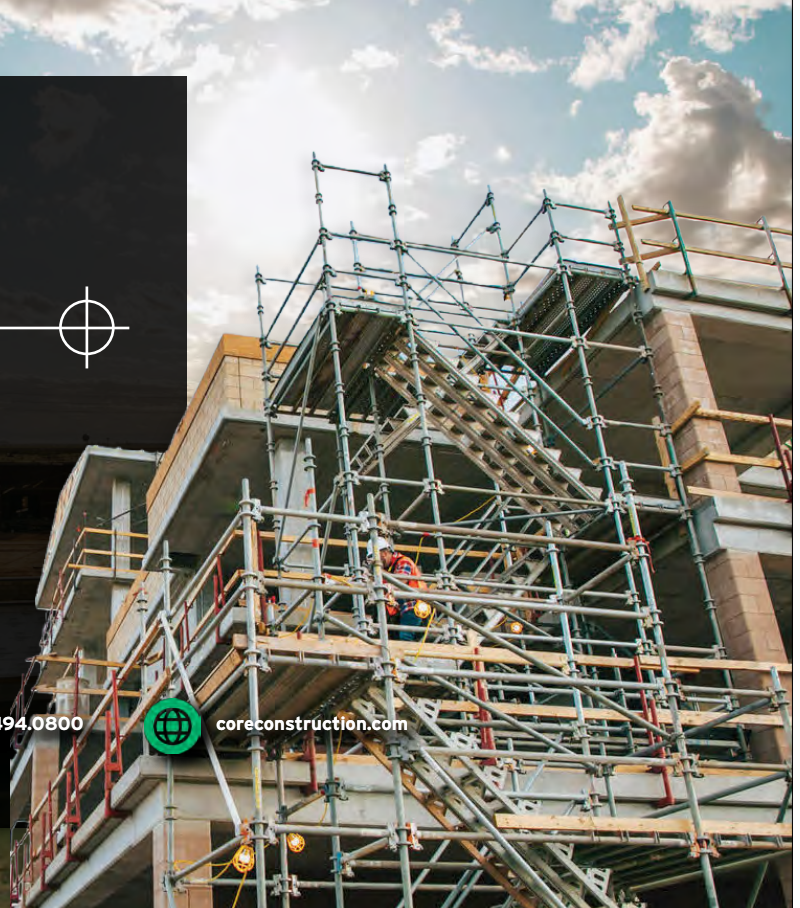
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10 TOP WEST VALLEY DESTINATIONS

The West Valley has a lot to offer visitors, from State Farm Stadium to Topgolf to incredible dining options to retail therapy at Tanger Outlets Phoenix. Here are 10 great places to check out, whether you're just visiting or an Arizona resident.

Desert Diamond Casino West Valley: With more than 75,000 square feet of gaming space, Desert Diamond Casino West Valley is where jackpots are a cause for celebration. Desert Diamond Casino West Valley also has delicious dining options and retail options with fashionable items.

Information: ddcaz.com/west-valley

Historic Downtown Glendale: Discover Historic Downtown Glendale, which has been named as one of the country's 10 best places for shopping and has received national accolades for dining.

Information: visitdowntownglendale.com

The Wildlife World Zoo: The Wildlife World Zoo, located four miles northwest of Litchfield Park, provides a natural habitat for many endangered species. The zoo specializes in African and South American animals, and has Arizona's largest collection of exotic animals.

Information: wildlifeworld.com

White Tank Mountain Regional Park: Explore the rugged terrain and the ancient Hohokam at the White Tank Mountain Regional Park and Nature Center. Most of the park is made up of the rugged and beautiful White Tank Mountains on the Valley's west side.

Information: maricopacountyparks.net

The Wigwam: Make your own history at The Wigwam — Arizona's rich cultural and iconic resort for more than 90 years. It was originally built for Goodyear executives visiting the farming operations. In 1929, The Wigwam opened to the public and soon became a fashionable and exclusive resort.

Information: wigwamarizona.com

Phoenix Raceway: Phoenix Raceway is a 1-mile, low-banked tri-oval race track in that currently hosts two NASCAR race weekends annually including the final championship race since 2020.

Information: phoenixraceway.com

Cerreta Candy Company: Factory Tours are available Monday-Friday and visitors can purchase a Chocolate Tasting Tour Pass for a guided tour of the factory and sample the delicious chocolate.

Information: cerreta.com

Westgate Entertainment District: Nestled in the heart of Glendale, Westgate Entertainment District offers a dazzling display of specialty shops, eateries and entertainment with a unique sense of community.

Information: westgateaz.com



SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE:

"Westgate takes the shopping center concept to a whole new level," says Jessica Kubicki, marketing director for Westgate Entertainment District. "More than just a mall, we're a destination for integrated experiential marketing. Our varied attractions, which include over 300 Westgate-produced events each year, coupled with our strategic leasing efforts begets a standout destination for both shoppers and visitors." *(Photo provided by Westgate Entertainment District)*

Lake Pleasant Regional Park: With more than 23,000 acres of water and beautiful, unblemished desert landscape, Lake Pleasant Regional Park is one of the most scenic recreation areas in the Valley.

Information: visitpeoriaaz.com

Estrella Mountain Regional Park: Estrella Mountain Regional Park boasts 20,000 acres of pristine desert, mountains and a large wetland. Many amenities are available to visitors, including baseball fields, picnic area, a golf course, fishing from the Gila River, and over 33 miles of trails for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding.

Information: maricopacountyparks.net **AB**



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HIRE GROUND

The West Valley is doing all the right things to strengthen and build the workforce of the future

By MICHAEL GOSSIE

The West Valley has become a magnet for a wide range of industries, including healthcare, advanced manufacturing and data centers, according to Buckeye Mayor Eric Orsborn.

“Today, the West Valley has a growing and diverse population, attracting professionals, families and businesses alike,” Orsborn says. “This creates vibrant communities and a robust pipeline for future development.”

It has also attracted thousands of new jobs. “Buckeye has led the way in sharing the ‘reverse the commute’ story, emphasizing the availability of skilled labor within the area,” Orsborn says. “The region has been successful in diversifying the industry base, moving from a bedroom community to attracting investments from companies such as Microsoft, Boeing and Amkor. As the region brings new jobs to the West Valley, every community benefits since these are

career opportunities residents across the West Valley can take advantage of.” Those economic development wins have also required a solid workforce development plan to assure those companies bringing billions of dollars in investments and thousands of new jobs to the West Valley that there is an eager and skilled workforce waiting to fill those jobs. To get a closer look at the region’s long-term vision, Az Business talked with Kevin Dumcum, director of workforce development for WESTMARC.

Az Business: What does a region need to do to develop a good workforce?

Kevin Dumcum: First, businesses need to be at the table and they need to tell us what they're looking for. Too often, an agency — whether it's government or nonprofit — will create a product to solve a problem and then present it to a business and it doesn't quite meet what they need. So, we really need businesses to be engaged in the problem-solving to begin with so products or services are built to meet a specific need.

No. 2, I'm a huge proponent of work-based learning programs, where businesses take on apprentices or interns — hopefully paid — and also unpaid career technical education (CTE) programs. Businesses should be reviewing curriculum, providing staff who can teach the curriculum, and get engaged in their own workforce development, so they are driving the discussion and everything we do on the workforce supplier side be to build and meet their stated needs.

AB: Are there sectors that are doing a good job in helping develop their own workforce of the future?

KD: Construction has been doing it for decades. They are leading the apprenticeship charge. But what's exciting is when I see our healthcare partners begin to explore what it would mean to create an apprenticeship programs within healthcare. They're evaluating what the regulatory requirements are and how they can work within their regulatory requirements in professions like nursing. So, healthcare is getting involved with workforce development. We are looking to engage more manufacturing companies because their skilled needs are adjacent to construction, but they have historically not been very engaged with apprenticeship programs. Those three are probably the big ones: Construction, healthcare and manufacturing.

AB: What are the greatest strengths of the West Valley's workforce in 2024?

KD: Our greatest strength is the strength of our education programs. I've been very impressed with our colleges, our community colleges, and the way that they have adopted the ability to pivot and to create non-degree programs. Five or 10 years ago, that would've been a non-starter. But our colleges and universities are becoming very adaptive with creating non-credit programs.

Businesses are recognizing that what they need are skills and not necessarily a degree. So, if you can get a skill in six months or a

year as opposed to spending two years or four years working toward a degree, then you're that much further ahead in your career.

And for those who are interested in pursuing a degree, ASU's West Valley campus now offers undergraduate degree programs that prepare them for the increasing number of technology and engineering opportunities that are available in the West Valley.

AB: What is the West Valley doing right when it comes to developing the workforce for the future?

KD: One of the things a number of the cities is doing is offering scholarship opportunities to residents. Offering scholarships removes a barrier for West Valley residents and makes it easier for residents to take classes and stay relevant in the workforce. A lot of businesses are also offering scholarships through their foundations. So, that is very encouraging.

AB: Where are the greatest opportunities for young people to start a career or build a career in the West Valley?

KD: Because the West Valley is growing so rapidly and our economic base is so diverse, it really is pretty wide open. One of the sectors that offers tremendous opportunities is healthcare because our population is growing and healthcare is diversifying as new technology becomes available. There's also manufacturing with Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company coming into the West Valley and KORE Power coming into Buckeye. With the support agencies that will come in with both of those companies, manufacturing is going to be growing exponentially. Our business services sector — professional services, financial finances, insurance, real estate, attorneys — is one of the West Valley's biggest industries. They're small businesses and a lot of them are entrepreneurs, but you add them all up and the business services sector is the West Valley's biggest source of employment.



Kevin Dumcum



Eric Orsborn

AB: So, small businesses are big business in the West Valley?

KD: Our entrepreneur ecosystem is thriving and our technology ecosystem is thriving. When we began to track West Valley technology startups in 2018, we had one. Now, we're well into double digits year over year and growing the number of technology startups by 30% to 40% each year. That may be one person working in a garage, but eventually they're going to scale and start to expand, and then they're going to be hiring. So, that's very exciting for the West Valley.

AB: What are some of your goals as director of workforce development for WESTMARC?

KD: One is continue to work on creating pathways for businesses to engage with workforce development. The corollary to that, and the other side to that coin, is finding ways to coordinate the needs of businesses with our workforce development ecosystem. There are ways we can do that where everybody wins.

One thing I tell businesses is don't try to do it alone. Gone are the days where you just post a position on Indeed and hope you get enough candidates because you're looking for a unicorn, and unicorns aren't going through those channels. So get some help. Help and guidance is available from WESTMARC and other agencies at no cost or very low cost. And if a particular agency isn't able to help, we all talk to each other, so we can point you in the right direction. But, reach out for help. **AB**

West Valley Pipeline

What it is: The West Valley Pipeline is a regional workforce development strategy that serves as the guiding document in developing an educated skilled workforce, moving the region forward in a competitive fashion, attracting new businesses and creating excellent career opportunities for residents.

Learn more: westmarc.org

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