

LAI 2024 Phoenix Gathering

By Peter Madrid | MadridMedia

Municipalities working in cooperation. Finding the missing middle. How low housing supply hurts affordability and affects homelessness. Recrafting a master planned community for today’s needs. Reviving an entertainment district. Bringing desert to development, responsibly. And zoning’s unintended consequences.

Those were some of the themes that resonated with the nearly 100 attendees at the 2024 Land Economics Phoenix Gathering, held October 16-18 and hosted by the Lambda Alpha International (LAI) Phoenix Chapter.

Three days were devoted to LAI executive planning, recognizing outstanding contributions, and exploring and gaining insight into topics relevant to the Arizona Valley of the Sun – the booming West Valley, housing affordability, and responsible water use.

Attendees stayed at Found:RE Phoenix, an art boutique hotel in the heart of Downtown Phoenix.

“Having attended other LAI gatherings in the past, I know that many members attend because we simply like being together and sharing ideas. And thinking about the past gatherings, we have typically covered a broad range of topics tied to land economics, issues that cross all of our chapters. This gathering did not disappoint in that way,” said LAI International President Kathline King. “This gathering had its own twist, and the program wasn’t just the same stuff that we’ve discussed before. The presentations were current, brought to life by recent research on housing and water. From a professional standpoint this gathering provided so much real data and also hands-on opportunities to see the communities and projects up close.”



Opening Dinner, Reception & Awards Ceremony



After a day of executive committee meetings and roundtable discussions, attendees were whisked away to the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired Arizona Biltmore, which is celebrating its 95th anniversary.



Michael Klein, LAI Phoenix Chapter President, welcomed the attendees. A traditional Native American blessing was given by Robert Stone, Former Lt. Governor of the Gila River Indian Community, followed by remarks by Kathline King, LAI International President (Los Angeles Chapter), and Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego.



Presenting awards was Dr. James Fawcett Ph.D., LAI Past President, Fellow, and Awards Committee Chair. Awards were presented to:

- Richard T. Ely Distinguished Educator Award: Hazel Edwards, Ph.D. FAICP; presented to the person who has achieved excellence within the academic world in the field of land economics or one of its constituent disciplines.



- International Journalist/Author Award: Jason Barr, Ph.D.; presented either to a journalist or an author whose efforts have contributed to a greater understanding of the principles, practices and greater awareness of land economics.



- Member of the Year Award: Susannah Bergmann, LAI Baltimore; the winner is selected from Chapter nominations of Chapter Member of the Year honorees for the current or prior year by the International Awards Committee and will be based upon commitment to Lambda Alpha, to the nominee's profession and to land economics with respect to achievement in the private or public sectors, research or education.



- Skyline Award: Central Arizona Water Conservation Project and District (CAWCD). The presenter was Terry Goddard, Central Arizona Project CAWCD Board President; former Phoenix Mayor, 1984-1990; and former Attorney General of Arizona, 2003-2011.

Goodard highlighted the successful conservation efforts of the CAWCD, a multi-county water district formed to contract with the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to deliver Central Arizona Project water; operate, maintain and manage it; and to repay the federal government for costs of constructing the project.





Day 1: The Booming West Valley

The first full day of tours began with an informative presentation, “Understanding Arizona and the Valley of Sun,” by Claudia Sieb, LAI International Communications Director and member of the Board of Governors; and Dr. Sheila Harris, Ph.D., LAI International Past President and LAI Fellow.



The Valley of the Sun is bolstered by a diverse economy and a population of 7.4 million, making Phoenix the fifth largest city in the U.S. As a second wave of westward migration began after the end of World War II, Phoenix was seen as a place to get inexpensive, quality housing. The state flourished, identifying “Five Cs” as the traditional pillars of its economy: copper, cattle, cotton, citrus, and climate.

A lot has changed since then. Phoenix now boasts a diverse economy that is led by cutting edge technology, including semiconductor manufacturing at the \$65 billion (at completion) Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company facility in North Phoenix. The state also lays claim to a robust healthcare sector, high-quality higher education, and tourism/entertainment. Municipalities partnering with the development community was key to this transformation to a more resilient economy.



“Ring the bell of all the municipalities; tell them we can’t do the same thing. Tell them we must diversity our economy,” Dr. Harris said. “People listened, and we did create a diverse economy.”

Playing a big role in driving Phoenix’s diverse economy is its vibrant downtown. From the light rail to more than 11,000 college students at the Arizona State University Downtown Campus to parks to new retail and residential projects, the city’s urban core is a true sign of economic opportunity.

Tim Sprague, Partner with Habitat Metro and Developer of Found:RE Phoenix discussed the organic growth of downtown Phoenix, followed by Devney Majerle, CEO of Downtown Phoenix Inc., who gave her presentation, “Creating a True Energy Hub.”



Attendees filled two buses and hit Interstate 10 for the bustling West Valley cities of Goodyear, Glendale, Surprise, and Peoria. First up was a lunch discussion at

Goodyear's signature master-planned community, Estrella.



Home to more than 8,200 families, Estrella is a 20,000-acre mixed-use master-planned community approximately 17 miles west of Phoenix. Estrella includes community centers, fitness centers, schools, medical, shopping, more than 50 parks and 65 miles of paths and trails, plus 72 acres of lakes for kayaking, sailing, and catch-and-release fishing. This community was started in the late 1980s and was purchased two years ago, with Harvard Investments serving as managing partner. Their task has been to revive, reinvigorate and replan the community and its remaining 10,000+ acres to accommodate today's needs for product mix and better segmentation, thereby providing more types of residences for more types of needs. In 2025 and 2026, as many as 1000 new homes will be made available to buyers.

Featured speakers were Tim Brislin, President of Harvard Investments, managing partner of Estrella, and Jeff Zimmerman, Vice President of Development for Estrella Development Company. Greg Vogel, CEO of Land Advisors served as moderator for a very forthcoming conversation about costs, challenges and opportunities.



The Peoria Sports Complex (complete with an Arizona Fall League baseball game in progress) was the next stop. Spring training facility for the San Diego Padres and Seattle Mariners, the complex is part of Peoria's P83, the gateway to dozens of entertainment options including establishments by noted Phoenix restaurateur Sam Fox. Neighboring city of Surprise representative also presented during this segment.

"There was a need for quality restaurants and retail shops," said Susana Trasente with the City of Peoria Economic Development Services. "Now we have the No. 2 lifestyle center in the West Valley."



A trip to Westgate, the top lifestyle center in the West Valley, capped off Day 1. From farmland to entertainment district, Westgate is a 223-acre, \$1 billion destination for dining, concerts, sporting events, and hospitality. The presentation hit on the challenges

of building an entertainment zone “from scratch” and the efforts it took to achieve today’s enviable success.

State Farm Stadium, home to the NFL Arizona Cardinals, has played host to Super Bowls, NCAA Final Fours, and major concerts (Taylor Swift launched her Eras Tour at the stadium) – all under a retractable roof. Desert Diamond Arena has a seating capacity of 17,125 for ice hockey, 18,300 for basketball and about 19,000 for concerts.

Rising from the desert floor in the shadow of State Farm Stadium is VAI Resort, an estimated \$1 billion destination set to open in 2025. Once finished, it will be Arizona’s largest hotel, entertainment, and culinary destination with 1,100 rooms, suites, and villas; 12 signature restaurants; a luxury spa; nightclub venue; and indoor theater.



The final presentations of the day were held at Chicken N Pickle, an innovative retail offering at Westgate. Interacting with the attendees was Sintra Hoffman, President and CEO of WESTMARC, which covers more than 3,000 square miles and represents 15 communities and 1.8 million residents in the West Valley.

“While our West Valley cities do compete against each other, they also help each other out,” Hoffman said. “The growth of our West Valley has been phenomenal. From sports and entertainment to new and exciting downtowns, West Valley cities are flourishing. People used to ask, ‘Why does Scottsdale have this and we don’t?’ The West Valley has so much to offer now.”



Day 2: Housing Affordability

Housing affordability is a topic that is becoming all too common and making headlines locally and nationally. The final day of LAI 2024 Phoenix Gathering was devoted to the challenges – and solutions – associated with affordable housing.

“Early on, there has to be an understanding of how to take advantage of programs to help solve this issue,” said Patricia Garcia Duarte, Senior Vice President of Chicanos Por la Causa in Phoenix, an advocate for underserved individuals and communities.

Also speaking was Eva Olivas, Director of Phoenix Revitalization Corporation, a non-profit community development corporation dedicated to the revitalization of neighborhoods by facilitating community improvement projects, and the maintenance and creation of low-income and workforce housing.



The buses loaded for a short drive to Aeroterra, a community that was once a public housing site that now provides over 500 units of apartments and homes for families and

seniors and incorporates nearby educational, medical, and community services. The jewel of Aeroterra is its community center.

Presentations were given by Cindy Stotler, Housing Director of Phoenix IDA; Titus Mathew, Director of Phoenix Housing; and Dan Richards, Co-founder and Partner of private developer Greenlight Communities.

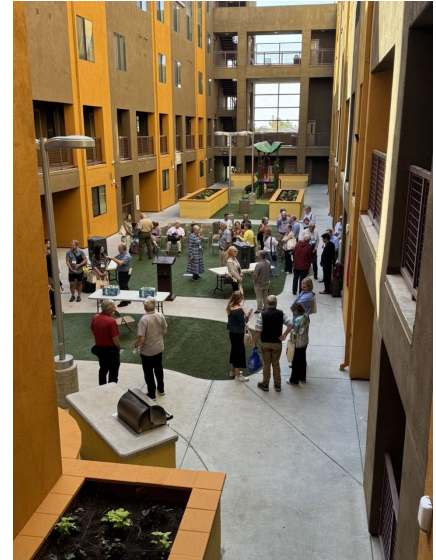
“The goal of all of us on this panel is to explore and develop attainable housing,” Richards said. “Almost 90 percent of multifamily that is being built in Phoenix is considered luxury product, and only 18 percent of the population can afford that. We need to find the missing middle.”



The keynote speaker for this year's event was Dr. Kil Huh, Senior Vice President of Government Performance for the PEW Charitable Trust. His message: “With rents nationally reaching all-time highs, low housing supply is hurting affordability. More supply equals lower housing costs.”



The final bus stop was Devine Legacy, an affordable housing development that provides residences for a variety of income levels in Midtown Phoenix along the light rail. Speakers included Trula Breuninger, (Navajo/Dine) CEO of Native American Connections and Jennifer Jennings, Senior Director of Property Management. Devine Legacy is named in honor of Dede Yazzie Devine, who served for more than 40 years as Executive Director of Native American Connections.



Just as LAI 2024 Phoenix Gathering opened with a Native American blessing, it closed with a blessing, given by Hedy Emery, (Navajo/Dine) a Native Traditional Healer who works at Native American Connections.

To finish the day, attendees took the Metro light rail to the Friday Fiesta Finale, held at Barcoa, a food and drink downstairs speakeasy. Attendees took a tour of XICO, one of the oldest ethnic arts organizations in the U.S. The Phoenix Gathering wrapped up with members enjoying authentic regional Mexican food, artisanal tequila, and LAI signature camaraderie.



“This was a very lively gathering. What comes to mind, and drawing from the meaning of the city name, Phoenix, it felt like “rising up.” Rising, in terms of the municipalities and communities in the West Valley. Rising up in terms of overcoming some of the water challenges. There is a unique history of the water challenges, here. Some of the different municipalities and developers have had to change course with their projects in the past; it was great to hear about critical decision points with master plans and look at the evolution over phases of development, to the present,” King said.

“We also looked at issues in Phoenix of affordable housing and how they have been dealt with; solutions Phoenix and other communities have come up with. We had a wonderful presentation from the PEW Charitable Trust with in-depth analysis and data on the underlying problem of housing supply, costs and homelessness, and comparing whether and how several large cities have made headway in delivering affordable housing.



“Our host chapter revealed a great perspective. It’s amazing how the Valley of the Sun is growing and blossoming,” King added.