

## Mayor's Monthly Message: October 2019

This month, we held our First State of the Town....It has been my desire, for some time, to hold this event in Florence, this is a time for celebration. We have accomplished so much over the past year. But we cannot simply look into the rearview mirror. We must also consider the much larger and more important view of what we have lying before us. We must build our future, by preparing for what is next. We will take time... To celebrate... To reflect... and to dream. We will not "dream" in the sense of setting 'pie-in-the-sky' expectations that are rarely met or only partially achieved. But we will envision, *together*, a Florence that is better because of our collective work to continuously improve our community.

The work of continuous improvement has been occurring since our founding in 1866. As one of Arizona's oldest towns, our history runs deep through our veins. We are doing much to preserve that history, protect it from fading, and to further promote its importance. This year, we lost a historic structure on Main Street, the Kokopelli Moon Saloon, to fire. Instead of sitting by with a major eyesore and a danger to the health and wellness of our downtown, we allocated funding to demolish the building, clean up the site, and prepare it for future reinvestment. We have also worked with amazing community leaders, the Smith family, to form a partnership to restore the historic Cuen Building to new glory, while retaining its place within the historic fabric of Florence. Additionally, each year we partner with our beautiful Pinal County Historical Museum to host the Annual Historic Florence Home Tour, which brings in hundreds of people from near and far, to tour these beautiful buildings, and which was recognized this year with the Outstanding Cultural Awareness Program Award by the Arizona Parks and Recreation Association. We look forward to the 35<sup>th</sup> iteration of this tour, which will occur on Saturday, February 8, 2020. Town staff has been hard at work to update and modernize our outdated Historic Redevelopment Plan. This plan provides a baseline to protect history, while enticing more business and residential activity within the redevelopment area. In addition to this, our staff is also working on a program to entice historic property owners to maintain their buildings and properties, which we hope to see in the coming year. Our history is unique, and if we use it properly, can help to beautify and draw visitors to the rest of our community.

Each year, our residents and business owners pitch in to make Florence a fantastic place to call home. Over the past year, Florence has received numerous recognitions for these efforts. Florence has been rated:

- #1 Safest City in Arizona, Security Baron
- #1 Safest City in Arizona, The National Council for Home Safety and Security (alarms.org)
- #1 Safest City in Arizona, HomeSnacks
- #3 Safest City in Arizona, SafeWise

- #1 Best Suburb to Buy a House in Phoenix Area, Niche
- #1 Best Places for Young Professionals in Pinal County, Niche
- #3 Safest City to Live in Arizona, BackgroundChecks.org
- #1 Best Places to Retire in Arizona, HomeSnacks
- #3 Best Place to Retire, AZBigMedia
- #10 Best AZ Retirement Communities, Anthem at Merrill Ranch, GolfAt55
- #6 Best Place to Retire in Arizona, Movoto

I want to break some of these down, to discuss how they happened and why they are so important to the future of our community.

As Arizona's safest community, Florence is proud to offer a secure environment for our residents. Our outstanding public safety employees and partners are what make this a possibility.

This past year, a highly successful Community Emergency Response Team (or "C.E.R.T. Team") was implemented. The C.E.R.T. Team accompanies our emergency response professionals to calls and trainings in which their resources, skills, and training create a safer environment for all. Another positive program geared towards fire safety is the Wireless Fire Alarm system in the downtown area, which has expanded exponentially and is now a full network with 10 users (and many more planned). This system allows for a fire alarm retrofit of old and historic buildings which does not require the buildings to be torn apart in order to be wired for traditional fire alarms. This results in lower costs for the property owner while providing the same level of safety as traditional alarms. It also allows our emergency responders to arrive at the scene of fires quicker, thereby enhancing safety and helping to preserve our historic downtown.

Not to be overlooked, our Police Department also continues to serve our community exceptionally well. Some of their successes this past year have been working with partners at Pinal County to restart the Graffiti Abatement Program, which will help to clean-up the Town. The Police Department also enhanced its community policing efforts by implementing a Facebook account, in an effort to better communicate with our citizens and community. In the coming year, they are working towards the implementation of electronic citations, and also hope to kick-off the "Text to 911" program, which will allow the community to report issues via text message. This is an initiative that Maricopa County recently started, and it has proven especially beneficial in certain instances where crime victims or witness or unable to talk or make noises when reporting a crime. The Town is also currently recruiting for a new police chief, as our beloved Dan Hughes will be retiring in December.

Florence ranks high on many 'quality of life' scales because of many of the excellent amenities that we enjoy in the area. Recreational opportunities are readily available at Box Canyon, the Coke Ovens, the Gila River, or Poston Butte. This year, we expanded our commitment to these valuable resources by obtaining the approval of a lease with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for 200+ acres to expand the Poston Butte Preserve. This will bring new trails and recreational facilities to the northern part of our town and will expand the access our residents and visitors have, to explore the natural beauty of our community.

Our signature town events add to the atmosphere of excitement in Florence. While Country Thunder brings tens of thousands of guests from around the world each April, the ROAD TO Country Thunder event, held in our downtown in the days leading up to Country Thunder, gives an opportunity for country music fans to see up-and-coming artists in a family-friendly environment. In a few weeks, downtown businesses will be lit up orange and black, with skeletons, tombstones, and spider webs, as they celebrate Halloween Fright Fest. Junior Parada, the United States' longest running junior rodeo (and its accompanying parade!), continues to succeed at the end of November. Christmas on Main Street gives another opportunity for a parade, and is a welcome kickoff to the holiday season. This year, for the first time, Florence will also be hosting a Drive-In movie (Aladdin) on November 22<sup>nd</sup>. These hallmark events bring our community together and help to explain why Florence is recognized as such a great place to live.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention the many businesses in town that go into any measure of 'quality of life'. We have seen new stores and businesses emerge in the Downtown area, like Blue Skye Boutique, Rail Three, the Main Street Vault, and ;a new Circle K gas station/convenience market. These compliment the many wonderful eateries, banks, government offices, markets, and stores that everyone should visit as soon as we are done here! In sum, Florence issued 996 business licenses in the past year. There are lots of people doing business in Florence!

One of the most notable of these was celebrated last week, as we held the ribbon cutting for the new and improved Florence Hospital, A Campus of Mountain Vista Medical Center. This state-of-the-art facility includes an operating room suite, a 22-bed Emergency Room, an inpatient care center, and a new laboratory that will be able to process labs quicker and without having to outsource this work to other facilities. We are so blessed to have Steward Health as a partner in our community and look forward to many years of success at the Florence Hospital.

Our high quality of life is also supplemented by our wonderful schools. Our community has invested heavily in our school district, and our kids are receiving a great education! The District

is integrating technology in the classroom to continuously improve and to build the leaders of tomorrow.

Speaking of building, growth has become a cornerstone of Florence. The School District recently completed an expansion of its K-8 gymnasium, which allows for increased capacity and additional room to respond to the growth of junior high sports.

Pinal County recently announced their plans to expand facilities in Florence. We have already worked with the County to begin reviewing these plans and will welcome the new Class A office space that they will bring to town.

Perhaps the biggest growth, though, has occurred in our new homes. In the Phoenix region (and including Pinal County), Florence has seen the third largest percent growth of any community in single-family home permits over the last year. Just last month (in September) the Town issued more than 50 single-family home permits. This includes some infill development downtown but is mainly concentrated in the Anthem area with DR Horton and Pulte continuing to invest in our community. We are on pace to issue more new single-family home permits this year than any year since 2008. These new rooftops could open greater possibilities for retail development. We will continue to pursue these opportunities to broaden Florence's economic tax base.

To appropriately build our future, our growth in homes, businesses, and events that draw people to our town must be paired with improvements to our infrastructure. Putting new sewer pipes in the ground may not be something that is talked about on a regular basis, but it is vital to prepare for what is coming by getting that type of infrastructure in the ground. Florence is replacing and expanding infrastructure across town, with new fiber installation for faster and redundant data communication. New work at the sewer treatment plants is modernizing these facilities, and a water recharge facility will come on board soon, which is proof that Florence is investing in the future of water in the region. New water lines are being installed throughout the downtown area, to provide redundancy and reduce downtimes when aged water lines crumble. Drainage has been improved in Florence Gardens, and Downtown has storm water projects scheduled, all of which will minimize the impact that large storms can have on our residents.

Not to be overlooked is Florence's massive investment in transportation infrastructure. As a percentage, the population of Florence grows by nearly 30% during the day. It is important to get these people to their destinations as easily as possible. As such, Hunt Highway has been improved over the past few years, with new traffic signals, enhanced surface treatments, and increased capacity. Engineering is underway to make the intersection of Hunt Highway and Attaway Road operate more efficiently. Additional surface treatments are planned to continue

to ensure this vital route is in good shape for those that travel on our roads to get to work, play, and food destinations in Florence. 1<sup>st</sup> Street was completed repaved, also with drainage improvements that will help this area of downtown. In the coming year, we will begin to see more work on the Gila River Bridge and roundabouts are planned for the southern portion of Town, at the convergence of State Routes 79 and 278. In a very real sense, we are literally building our future through these strategic investments in infrastructure.

Perhaps more so than at any other time in the history of Florence, we are being strategic and planning for future success. The Town Council is working on updating its strategic plan, to ensure the community's vision for the future is reflected in how the Town operates. The General Plan, which sets the guidelines for all development within the greater Florence area, is set to be updated starting later this year. That process will review all elements of life in Florence, and will ultimately go to the voters for their approval. The Active Transportation Plan and Regional Transportation Plan were recently approved, and the Parks and Recreation Master Plan is set for approval at an upcoming Town Council meeting. As mentioned earlier, the Downtown Redevelopment Plan is also a major undertaking that will prepare our downtown for preservation and revitalization. The Florence Citizen Survey was recently completed and will be presented to the Town Council at the end of the month. The Town is working closely with the United States Census Bureau to ensure all residents are counted during the 2020 Census. This major undertaking will help the Town ensure that it is getting an adequate amount of resources from the state and federal government. Each person counted brings about \$3,000 in Federal funding to our community each year. It is crucial that each of us fill out our census forms – either online, by phone, or by mail – when we receive them in early March 2020.

Finally, Florence has begun building for our future by continuing to modernize outdated practices, policies, codes, and equipment. Just months ago, the Town was still operating under the International Building Codes established in 2006. After a very lengthy process that ensured all viewpoints were addressed, the Town updated these to the 2012 Codes.

Florence has read water meters the same way for many years. A dedicated employee has walked around to each meter, lifted the lid, written down the water use, and reported this to the finance department for billing. With his upcoming retirement, the Town has contracted with a company to implement a new technology that will have the capability to monitor each water meter at any given second, transmitting this data to our billing system without the need for lifting a lid, or driving around town. This is built on the framework of a new data network that has been secured through a contract with one of the world's leading cybersecurity firms. This work has brought the Town acclaim from international news coverage on the network and security and has launched the Town into the spotlight of the "Smart City" movement. In the next few years, we anticipate an ability to use these new technologies to work better, smarter,

and more efficiently for our taxpayers. We are no longer living in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and we are not content to just prepare for today's needs, but we are preparing for the future through these exciting efforts.

In sum, it all adds up to it being an awesome time to be in Florence. Looking on the horizon, we can see a vibrant community that we are each proud to call home. Thank you for your help in bringing this community together.

### **EXTRA INFORMATION**

The Administration Department includes the Town Manager's Office, Town Clerk's Office, Public Information Office, Economic Development, Information Technology, and Geographical Information Service Functions, all location at Town Hall. They work synergistically with all departments and elected officials. This past year, some of the highlights included Constructing a Recharge Facility. This year, some of the tasks they are gearing up for, include: the Council Strategic Plan Update; Poston Butte Preserve acquisition; Veterans Memorial and a complete count for the 2020 Census.

We are fortunate, as in this department, we have some staff members that serve on National and/or State Boards. Specifically,

- Brent Billingsley (ASFPM Arid Regions Committee, Member); (Horizon Health and Wellness, Board Member)
- Lisa Garcia (International Institute of Municipal Clerks, Board Member)
- Ben Bitter (International City/County Management Association, Digital Strategies Advisory Board, Chair) In addition, Ben was published in an article about the importance of PIOs by ELGL.org

This year, our Community Development Department, also known as the Planning Department is responsible for current and long-range planning and zoning functions for the Town. Building inspection, plan review, historic preservation, code compliance activities, refuse collection and disposal, cemetery operations are also overseen by this department.

Over this past year, the Community Development Department has updated from the 2006 International Construction Codes to the 2012 International Construction Codes. In addition, they Initiated systematic updates to the Town's Development Code to better reflect industry standards and the evolving fabric of the development of the Town of Florence. Another improvement was upgrading the functions within the "One-Stop-Shop" operations including more integrated use of the SmartGov permitting and reporting software.

In the upcoming year, the department plans on completing the mandatory update to the Town of Florence Redevelopment Plan. As well as, initiate the required update to the Town of Florence General Plan. Another priority effort is working synergistically to Increase the focus on the revitalization to Historic Downtown Florence.

In special recognition, James Allen, who is our Building Official earned his title as a Certified Building Official and Certified Building Code Specialist.

This year, our Community Services Department, also known as Parks and Recreation has been quite busy with planning and facilitating the daily activities and events. They work hard at providing programs, services and access to facilities that enrich the quality of life for all residents. Some highlights this past year, include: implementation of the "Give-A-Lift" program, utilizing volunteer drivers to help elderly and disabled get to medical appointments; The adoption of the Active Transportation Plan; and The Arts and Culture Commission created a new mural in Historic Downtown Florence.

This coming year, Community Services is working diligently towards the completion and dedication of the Florence Veterans Memorial Plaza; Approval of a lease with Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for 200+ acres to expand the Poston Butte Preserve; and the Adoption of the Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan

In 2019, the Town of Florence Fire Department protects the lives and property of our citizens by providing the most modern proficient fire and EMS services possible. They dedicate themselves to this challenge by planning for emergencies before they occur with an aggressive proactive program of Fire and EMS training, Life Safety Inspections, and public education within the community.

They work so hard training/synergizing as a team; they are fortunate enough to is past year, to fill needs internally with highly qualified candidates. As vacancies occurred, a series of promotional processes were completed that resulted in the promotion of 4 internal FD candidates in the Battalion Chief, Captain, Engineer and Firefighter's positions. In extending out into the community, this past year, a highly successful Community Emergency Response Team program was implemented. The C.E.R.T. Team accompanies our emergency response professionals to calls and trainings in which their resources, skills, and training create a safer environment for all. Another positive program geared towards fire safety is the Wireless Fire Alarm system in the downtown expanded exponentially and is now a full network with 10 users (and many more planned).

This coming year, the Fire Department plans to upgrade handheld and mobile radios: This upgrade will replace obsolete equipment and bring the FD up to current standards and achieve standardization with public safety agencies throughout Pinal County. In year one, the plan is to

replace handheld radios. During year two, if needed, they will replace mobile radios. Another priority planning project is to develop/update the FD vehicle capitol replacement program: This process will include replacing outdated equipment such as the water tender and replacing an aging, existing vehicle in our fleet with a ladder tender or similar vehicle. This is a common practice designed to extend the life of the ladder truck. The department is also looking to develop new options in their current staffing model: this will include evaluating options in establishing a shift commander presence on the weekends and staffing the transition response vehicle (TRV). The efficacy of the Part-time/Reserve program versus establishing a rover position will also be evaluated. Implement a new records management system: This includes the full implementation of a program called Image Trend that will result in enhanced data management capabilities, improved levels of mandatory reporting compliance, and the implementation of new fire, EMS, inspection and investigation electronic forms. Enhanced Community Risk Reduction (CCR) efforts: This will include the implementation of a high, medium and low risk safety inspection program, the full implementation of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program and establishing an FD presence in social media for safety messages and the dissemination of critical information during emergencies. Update the FD Career Manual and implement a Training and Professional Development Program: This includes the provision of training and educational guidance for all FD employees and maintaining minimum standards for promotion eligibility. Options for tuition reimbursement will also be explored.

The Fire Department has had a few special accomplishments and recognitions this past year. Engineer Mike Scherm was nominated for the Arizona State Firefighter of the year; Battalion Chief Jim Walter and Captain Bill Bruin completed the Managing Officer Program through the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland; and Firefighter Stephen Johnson has been appointed the Training Chairperson for the Arizona Chapter of the International Association of Arson Investigators.

The primary function of the police department of the Town of Florence and the reason for its existence is to protect life and property, maintain social order and enforce the laws of the State of Arizona and the Ordinances of the Town of Florence. They serve and protect all people within our jurisdiction with respect, fairness, and compassion. Some of their successes this past year has been the Graffiti Abatement Program, weapon transition from 40 to 9mm; and the Implementation of Social Media/Facebook in an effort to better communicate with our citizens and community. This coming year, they are working towards the implementation of electronic citations; implementation of Text to 911; a Tablet replacement program - upgrade to 800 MHZ system and tablet replacement program.

The Florence Police Department has had a few special accomplishments and recognitions this past year: Sgt. Klix – Graduated from the FBINAA Academy; and Sgt. Riccomini – Graduated from the Northwestern School of Staff & Command.

Our Town of Florence Human Resources Department continues to strive to attract and retain quality employees to provide our important services to our citizens, through ongoing evaluation of pay practices, personnel policies, benefits offered and recruitment and selection strategies.

**The IT Department has moved to** Town-wide software consolidation to IT; Implementation of threat detection response systems and cybersecurity anomaly detection; In addition, we've had server migration from citrix/vmWare to Microsoft Hyper-V. This coming year, IT is working towards 2008 File Server migration to new 2019 Virtualized Windows Server cluster environment. This will increase storage capacity and read/write speeds of network files while providing added redundancy. As well as desktop computer upgrades and a complete audio system overhaul in the council chambers. Some special recognitions that the IT Department has received has been international news coverage on the LoRaWAN/Cybersecurity.

### **2018-2019 Grants Activity Highlights**

The Town received Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding that totaled \$608,000 for two water line projects in the Town Core. The project entailed replacing more than 4,000 linear feet of 6-inch water line with 12-inch water line.

The Police Department received over \$140,000 in grant funding through the Arizona Department of Homeland Security to purchase 8 portable radios and a vehicle. The department was recently awarded \$51,000 from the Gila River Indian Community to purchase additional radios. These grants have provided more than 50% of the funding needed to replace the department's outdated portable radios.

The Senior Center received grant funding through ADOT to purchase a cutaway van with chair lift last year and received another grant to purchase a new van for the Senior Center this year. In addition, the Senior Center was awarded funding to start and operate the new Dial-A-Ride program. The total amount of grant funding for the two vehicles and Give A Lift program is \$123,000.

The Town has applied for funding through MAG to install dynamic feedback signs in the Anthem K-8 and Florence K-8 school zones. The project will also include the installation of bike lanes next to Florence K-8.

**Recognitions the Town has received:**

- #1 Safest City in Arizona, Security Baron
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- #1 Safest City in Arizona, HomeSnacks
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- #10 Best AZ Retirement Communities, Anthem at Merrill Ranch, GolfAt55
- #6 Best Place to Retire in Arizona, Movoto

As always, there are great things happening in Florence, AZ. We have the best community and people! Stay safe and enjoy. 😊

Sincerely,

Tara Walter  
Mayor of Florence, AZ  
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