

Smith: Mesa fighting 'a war for our future'

Mayor unveils
'innovation districts'
for job development

By Gary Nelson
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Mesa intends to step to the forefront of American cities and lead the way in innovation and job creation, Mayor Scott Smith said Thursday.

"This really is a war in many ways — a war for our future," Smith told about 500 people gathered for his annual Mayor's Breakfast at the Phoenix Hilton East/Mesa.

Speaking on the theme "Building the New American City," Smith used about 70 minutes to enumerate the accomplishments of his first 4½ years in office and to lay out aspirations for the future.

Smith did not deliver thunderclap announcements as he did in 2011, when he rolled out the iMesa community brainstorming project, or in 2012, when he said he would run again for mayor.



"innovation districts" to be created are (clockwise from top left) Mesa's downtown, Falcon Field, the Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport area and the Fiesta District. REPUBLIC PHOTOS

INNOVATION DISTRICTS

Mayor Scott Smith said Mesa will develop four "innovation districts" to seed innovation and job growth:

» **Downtown.** Assets include four new liberal-arts colleges, city offices, future light rail, arts center, museums and future Barry Goldwater Library.

» **Falcon Field.** Fifth-busiest general-aviation airport in country already hosts more than 100 businesses; about 126 acres on airport available for development.

» **Fiesta District:** Assets include acres of developable commercial space, Banner Desert Medical Center and Cardon Children's Medical Center, Mesa Community College, Fiesta Mall and other viable retail nodes.

» **Gateway area:** Seen as a powerhouse with virtually limitless potential, the area includes Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, AzLabs, Arizona State University's Polytechnic campus, Chandler-Gilbert Community College and the largely undeveloped former site of the General Motors Desert Proving Ground.

He did advance his agenda by saying he will ask the City Council to designate four "innovation districts" as economic development hubs.

In a sense, however, that would merely formalize the direction in which Mesa has trended for years: Downtown, the Fiesta District, Falcon Field and Gateway are emerging centers of Mesa's economic gravity, and much recent policymaking and infrastructure development have targeted those areas.

Smith offered few details on how they would develop.

In the downtown, unused space in the Mesa Center for Higher Education — the former court building at 245 W. Second St. — could be devoted to incubation efforts.

In the Fiesta District, he proposes a partnership with Mesa Community College to redevelop fallow retail space.

"No matter what good things have happened, we've got to do

better," Smith said. "The successes of 2012 and before were not the destination. They were part of the journey. They were the beginning in many ways."

Building on a theme struck in recent public appearances, Smith said he wants Mesa to become a "multigenerational city" where families will stay for decades because of the opportunities it offers.

For that to happen, Mesa needs more jobs and better jobs, he said. But they won't come by accident, he warned.

He cited statistics showing that America recovered from every recession between 1945 and 1991 within eight months. International competition has caused recent recessions to last longer and the last — the so-called Great Recession — created unemployment that is still higher than in 2008.

Further, he said, there is a worldwide shortage of "hundreds of millions of good jobs,"



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SCOTT SMITH
Mesa mayor

and it's just as easy to hand one to someone in China with Internet access as it is to hand one to an American college graduate.

The federal government, Smith said, has little interest in fixing that.

Noting that he had just returned from nearly a week in the capital for a U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting and other events, Smith said: "I heard about the fiscal cliff. I heard just a couple things about gun control."

But, he said, "I didn't hear a word about jobs," even though

mayors at the meeting agreed the health of their cities depends on a strong economy.

"I've spent enough time in Washington now to know that Washington will not solve our problems," he said.

The state, he said, can only lay the groundwork for new jobs, and even at that its educational efforts are falling short.

The much-touted Common Core curriculum moving into Arizona's mainstream, Smith said, isn't enough.

"If all of our students met the standards of the Common Core, we're still a second-tier country," he said. "Common Core shouldn't be a goal. It should be a beginning."

So if other entities won't fight for jobs, cities must.

"The most important challenge we face as a city in 2013 and beyond is our ability to create jobs," Smith said. And that means turning Mesa into an innovation hub. "Innovation is

what's going to happen to make us successful," he said. "We can't rely on old strategies."

Smith noted that Mesa showed its flexibility in 2008, when, faced with a drastic revenue shortfall, it completely overhauled city government within a few months.

As another example, Smith cited the Mesa Fire and Medical Department's program with Mountain Vista Medical Center to staff medical response vehicles with health-care professionals. The model has been drawing national attention among cities looking for ways to reduce their emergency-response costs.

Smith also mentioned ongoing efforts to "rebrand" the East Valley to take advantage of the region's combined assets.

"For the first time, these communities have grown together," he said. "We have an asset base that's comparable to any in the world."