Gilbert looks to bring in more niche health industries

By Mike Walbert
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Gilbert will chug ahead with a goal of making the town a hub for holistic and women's health industries.

The Town Council decided Tuesday to continue a study examining Gilbert's strengths, weaknesses and options in bringing niche health industries to town.

Gilbert has several assets to make it happen, including new hospitals and a strong education base in the area, according to the first phase of a study conducted by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University.

The next phase will examine what kinds of holistic and women's health services and research opportunities exist for Gilbert and how to pay for them, said Nancy Welch, associate director of the Morrison Institute.

So, why is Gilbert undertaking these efforts?

"In terms of meeting that long-term goal . . . of 'live, work, play in Gilbert,' this is part of the strategy to get that employment base," Town Manager George Pettit said before Tuesday's meeting.

For about an hour, council members tossed out questions about the study and what they would like to see examined.

Mayor Steve Berman said Gilbert must really do its homework in identifying what health firms would want to set up shop in town.

Welch assured Berman that Phase II would address those issues.

Kathy Langdon, president and CEO of the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce, said health and wellness is the hot trend, which is why Gilbert needs to press forward with these plans. Plus, the efforts could make the community unique, she said.

"We can be great," Langdon said. "Or do we want to be 'wow?'"

The study's first phase cost the town about $33,000, while Phase II will cost about $30,000, town officials said.

In other business, council members supported a revised 30-year lease agreement for the construction of Polar Ice, a large ice-skating complex at Greenfield and Knox roads.

Much like the high-profile Big League Dreams project, Gilbert is partnering with a private business to build recreation opportunities on town land.

But before the lease agreement received approval, council members haggled over how much time Polar Ice would allot for public skating.
Polar Ice, which has other facilities in the Valley, draws hockey leagues and figure skating, and also offers public skating. Gilbert stands to receive a piece of the facility's revenue.

Berman argued Gilbert should have a say on the public-skate hours because the building, which has yet to be built, will be on municipal property.

"We do have a right to make some demands," Berman said.

However, some council members disagreed and asked that Gilbert allow Polar Ice to conduct its own business.

"There is no way we should dictate to them their hours," Councilman Don Skousen said.

The council ultimately declined requiring any specific hours for public skate beyond what Polar Ice deems necessary.

Council members approved a similar lease agreement change last week. However, concerns arose about the agreement's language and who would be held responsible financially if construction halted on the building.

Tuesday's approved revision intended to fix that concern.

Gilbert expects Polar Ice to open no later than Aug. 31.

The council also approved two judges pro tempore to serve the Gilbert Municipal Court.

Kathy Kozinets and Steven Wiggs each received two-year contracts. Kozinets has been a judge pro tempore for four years, while Wiggs has served more than 10 years.

Both, Presiding Judge David Phares said in a council memo, are qualified to continue serving the town.

Reach the reporter at mike.walbert@arizonarepublic.com.