Institute’s report spurred fresh thinking

First of six parts

The Scottsdale City Council was divided. Business leaders saw City Hall becoming more anti-growth, more unfriendly to business. They decided it was time to do something.

“There was a general and pervasive sense that Scottsdale was at a tipping point,” said Rick Kidder, president and CEO of the Scottsdale Area Chamber of Commerce.

But these business leaders did something extraordinary. They didn’t just complain. They hired an outside group with impeccable credentials to do an objective review of the city.

Thus was born “Which Way Scottsdale?” The Morrison Institute for Public Policy released the report five years ago this month, raising red flags that Scottsdale was at risk of losing its cachet in the Valley and nationally. People paid attention.

Scottsdale could not count on always being Scottsdale, the report warned. A smug arrogance blinded the community to the competition rising in the Valley and across the country for Scottsdale’s cachet.

“Quality of place means something different — and something more — than it used to,” the report warned. “Unless Scottsdale commits to competing in this new arena, the city is sure to find its legacy at risk.”

Report got people talking

“On a very real degree, it started to highlight issues that couldn’t be ignored,” Kidder said.

John Little, the city’s point man on downtown issues, said the report was cathartic.

“Its biggest value was in getting a lot of people talking,” he said. “It allowed us to be introspective. We did mobilize to tackle a few things.”

The revitalization of downtown stands out as the report’s biggest contribution.

At the time, a narrow plurality of Scottsdale residents said they had the best entertainment district in the Valley. But the rest of the Valley gave that title overwhelmingly to Tempe and Phoenix. They were right.

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Tempe’s Mill Avenue district was the place to find funky, unique nightspots. Scottsdale’s downtown was struggling for breath.

“Which Way Scottsdale?” forced the city to confront that truth. Barriers to revitalization were lifted. New zoning rules encouraged condos and apartments above first-floor retail uses. The market took over, pouring $3.3 billion into the area south of Chaparral. The result: a downtown unlike any in the Valley — or the country. It is uniquely Scottsdale.

That’s not the only difference “Which Way Scottsdale?” made.

Another is emerging at Scottsdale and McDowell roads, where the first tenants are moving into SkySong.

Despite their proximity, Scottsdale and Arizona State University had never partnered — due, in part, to Scottsdale’s view of itself as perfectly self-sufficient. “Which Way Scottsdale?” pointed out the benefits of regional cooperation and the importance of universities in creating a high quality of life.

That spurred fresh thinking. Instead of a Wal-Mart or a hockey rink, Scottsdale got something potentially more valuable: an innovation center combining the qualities of a research park, business incubator and ASU faculty.

“It was a huge statement by Scottsdale that it was open to ideas for a different way of economic development strategy,” said Mary Jo Waits, the report’s principal author. “Phoenix was already moving beyond a traditional downtown with the ASU campus, but this upped the ante. It’s better for the state to have them competing in this area than for retail.”

The point of SkySong is to nurture innovative research that leads to the creation of new, high-value jobs in
Scottsdale and Arizona. It's a foundation of the knowledge economy.

It's too soon to say if that result will be accomplished. But it's easy to argue that without "Which Way Scottsdale?" the city would have been left behind in investing in such a future.

Not all proposals followed

Other recommendations are gathering dust.

The report, for instance, suggested Scottsdale could be more successful if leaders and the community united behind a common vision. The council and community remain as fractured as ever on how to define what makes Scottsdale special.

"That's the biggest disappointment," said Waits, who now works at the Pew Center on the States in Washington, D.C. "Scottsdale, with all it has, could do so much if it had strong leadership and everyone could be on the same page."

There is no agreement on how to redevelop in a city approaching build-out. Traffic remains residents' No. 1 concern — and an impediment to attracting talented people who can choose to live anywhere. We're still trying to understand the implication of a Scottsdale that really is three (or four) different communities.

"Which Way Scottsdale?" was an eye-opener for a community complacent in its success. It has made a difference over the past five years, and its recommendations continue to resonate. The city has regained its footing in many ways, though work remains to be done, raising a new question:

Which way now?

Which way now?

Five years ago, a report called "Which Way Scottsdale?" changed the way the city looked at itself. This series revisits the report, what happened because of it and what remains to be done.

Today: How the report changed thinking in Scottsdale.

Thursday: What went right.

Friday: What has yet to happen.

Tuesday: Finding a common vision.

Wednesday: The future of tourism — and the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.

March 20: Attracting people with talent.

Who started it

The original "Which Way Scottsdale?" report was commissioned and funded by Barrett-Jackson Car Auction, Compass Bank, DMB Associates, Desert Mountain Properties, Discount Tire Co., General Dynamics, Scottsdale Area Chamber of Commerce, Scottsdale Healthcare, Scottsdale Insurance, Southwest Jet's, Dial Corp. and Wells Fargo Bank.