

FROM THE EDITOR

Reinvestment in tourism is at a 'staggering' pace



Ilana Lowery

If you've made it this far in this week's edition of the *Phoenix Business Journal*, you hopefully spent some time with our centerpiece story on tourism. The tourism industry in Arizona is one of the most important drivers we have fueling our economic engines.

To get more perspective on the strength of that sector, we brought in industry leaders from around the Valley to talk about what steers tourism.

Learning what the various organizations are doing to bolster tourism in their respective cities was eye-opening. But now, there is a shift in focus and renewed efforts to draw in locals, millennials and visitors, alike.

Some visitor groups, such as Scottsdale and Tempe, are putting resources into rebranding and marketing. Others, like Visit Phoenix, are focused on the here and now with the NCAA Final Four college basketball championship heading to the Valley in April.

Here's a quick look at what other tourism and hospitality leaders are working on:

► **Lorraine Zomok**, Visit Glendale manager, said her organization is in the final phase of becoming a full-fledged bureau with a new strategy and mission.

► **Stephanie Dowling**, deputy director of the Arizona Office of Tourism, said AOT is focused on educating state officials about tourism's economic stamp on the state. Tourism is on the front lines of economic development, Dowling said, with \$21 billion in visitor spending – \$3 billion in tax revenues collected by the state.

► **Kimberly Freer**, vice president of sales and marketing for Visit Mesa, said that group is focusing on "a theme park destination concept" in the East Valley that includes a "Foodie Trail" for culinary-centric visitors that includes Schnepf Farms and the Queen Creek Olive Mill.

Speaking of the Valley's culinary opportunities, all of the roundtable participants agreed the foodie scene is becoming a main attraction for people coming to the region. So are the recent "mega events" such as the Barrett-Jackson Classic Car Auction, Waste Management Phoenix Open and Phoenix International Raceway activities in March.

Rachel Sacco, CEO of Experience Scottsdale, said reinvestment back into the tourism industry as a result of these events is "staggering."

The economic fallout from 9/11, unfavorable illegal immigration legislation and the last recession hit Arizona's tourism sector hard. Panelists agreed, however, that with the improving economy, leisure travel growing at a faster pace and visitor tax dollars going farther, where the industry is now, and where it's going, is very positive.

Connect with Ilana Lowery at ilowery@bizjournals.com or on Twitter at [@PhxBizEditor](https://twitter.com/PhxBizEditor).