

Arizona Coach Talker

Newsletter of the Arizona Guides Association

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~ It's a New Year! ~

How is it already January 2026?! It seems we just fast forwarded through 2025 or time travelled to be here! I'm not one to pressure myself with New Year resolutions, but there is one we could all share as we work in our hospitality industry during 2026. Let's encourage our industry partners, i.e. DMC's, Tour Operators, etc., to recognize the important role that we, as AGA members, play in influencing their guests' experience during their time in Arizona. We are the people who initially welcome them to Arizona, and through our knowledge and experience provide the best outcome for their programs. Hopefully, we can continue to increase our membership this year by encouraging more industry professionals and individuals in our industry to join the AGA in support of our mission. The AGA provides education opportunities that foster an interest in Arizona history, and can help field staff be more informed and develop their skills, whether as tour guides or as activity and hospitality staff.

~ Focus on Arizona Agriculture ~

Arizona is officially betting on the future of farming — approving a \$3 million grant to launch the Arizona Hub for Agriculture Innovation, a new statewide effort to protect and modernize the state's \$30 billion agriculture industry. The hub will be based in Yuma and connects ASU, NAU, and the University of Arizona with farmers, engineers, and state agencies to turn university research into tools farmers can actually use in the field.

The focus is on helping agriculture survive — and thrive — in a hotter, drier, water-limited future. That means working on things like:

- Precision agriculture and smart irrigation
- Soil health and crop innovation
- Using data, sensors, and automation to reduce water and fertilizer waste
- Training the next generation of ag and tech workers

Instead of letting farmland dry up and get abandoned, the goal is to keep Arizona farming productive, profitable, and sustainable — while using less water and fewer resources.

Yuma was chosen because it's one of the most important year-round farming regions in the country, supplying a massive share of America's winter produce. What gets tested there could end up shaping how arid regions farm all over the world. Read details on the grant at:

<https://www.azregents.edu/news-releases/abor-approves-regents-research-grant-power-sustainable-agriculture-arizona>.

Dear AGA Members,

Happy New Year! Another year is officially in the books, and I hope you made it through the busy season with great stories, happy clients, and at least some time to put your feet up.

Serving as president of AGA has given me a front-row seat to just how solid this group really is. Guiding takes patience, skill, and a lot of heart, and you all show up with that every day. It's something I'm genuinely proud of and grateful to be a part of.

The year ahead is wide open and full of promise: fresh trails, new clients, old friends, and plenty of sunrises worth getting up early for. I'm excited about what's ahead for AGA and grateful to be moving forward alongside all of you.

Here's hoping the coming year brings steady work, smooth logistics, fewer surprises (the bad kind), and plenty of moments that remind you why you chose this life in the first place.

Thanks for being part of AGA. I look forward to another great year together.

Wishing you a happy, healthy, and adventure-filled New Year,

**Diane Schaeffler
President, AGA**

In case you missed it in the news.....

Crews are officially moving into the next phase of a massive Interstate 10 expansion project south of Phoenix, and drivers who regularly travel between the Valley and Casa Grande are about to see years of construction ahead. According to ADOT, work begins Monday, January 12, on the second phase of the Wild Horse Pass Corridor Project, which will widen I-10 from two lanes to three lanes in each direction. This phase covers a 10-mile stretch in Pinal County, running from Gas Line Road to just south of State Route 387, and construction is expected to last through late 2027.

The project is part of a much larger plan to widen 26 miles of I-10 south of Phoenix, aimed at reducing congestion on one of Arizona's busiest freeway corridors. Crews are wrapping up the first phase later this summer, which includes replacing and widening the Gila River bridges in both directions. Looking ahead, ADOT says phase three will move closer to the Valley later this year, widening 11 miles from Loop 202 near Ahwatukee and Chandler down to the Gila River bridges. That portion is expected to continue until late 2029. A fourth and final segment will begin in late 2026, filling the remaining three-mile gap.

Once the full project is complete, drivers can expect:

- Additional travel lanes
- New HOV lanes from Loop 202 to Riggs Road
- Rebuilt interchanges
- Two brand-new interchanges at Koli Road and Seed Farm Road

ADOT says the long-term goal is to improve safety, reduce backups, and keep up with rapid growth in Pinal County — but in the short term, drivers should prepare for construction zones, shifting lanes, and slower travel times over the next several years. <https://www.az511.com/>

TSMC Arizona.... bought 900 acres of land near Loop 303 and Interstate 17 at an Arizona State Land Department auction Jan. 7 to facilitate the company's massive semiconductor manufacturing facility's expansion. TSMC has not confirmed a timeline of when construction could begin on the new site. The starting bid for the land was \$197.25 million. The semiconductor giant indicated in September it was interested in the land to accommodate its \$165 billion facility in north Phoenix. At the time, Chris Dotts, a spokesperson for TSMC, said the company will need additional land to accommodate planned expansion of the fabrication facility. The overall plan includes six chip fabrication facilities, two advanced packaging facilities and a research and development center.

The Phoenix City Council approved the rezoning for the TSMC site and the broader area around it, called NorthPark, at a meeting in late December. The remainder of the NorthPark site is still controlled by the Arizona State Land Department, and will likely be auctioned in pieces in the future, though no auctions have been scheduled yet.

It is proposed to eventually have about 15,000 housing units, including single-family homes and apartments, along with multiple schools, commercial development and about 2,000 acres of natural open space. Homebuilder PulteGroup was the other applicant in the NorthPark zoning case that included the TSMC site.

The land purchase brings TSMC's holdings in north Phoenix to about three square miles. The paddle that Rose Castanares, president of TSMC Arizona, raised to bid on the land was the same paddle used by TSMC officials in its first land auction in Phoenix, in December 2020. The paddle number, 8, is a lucky number in Chinese numerology, symbolizing wealth.

VAI, the hotel and entertainment complex near Loop 101 and Cardinals Way, continues to delay its opening date. It has been under construction for more than four years and was first expected to open in 2023, then 2024, then 2025. The date was pushed as the construction timeline was altered numerous times. Now, the company's website says it will announce its opening date about nine months in advance.

One of the resort's latest updates was in September, when Glendale leaders voted to allow the company to purchase treated wastewater to fill its two large pools that are about an acre each. If and when it's completed, the resort would sit on 60 acres and offer 1,100 rooms across four hotel towers, a dozen restaurants and retail shops.

Other amenities include sandy beaches with temperature-controlled water, a 50,000-square-foot, European-inspired "party island," a bar that offers food and drinks at 130 feet in the air and tethered hot-air balloon rides.

It will also have an 11,000-seat amphitheater, where VAI intends to put on more than 100 shows each year. Grant Fisher, developer and CEO, has said he wants the resort to rival Las Vegas for music residencies.

Next to the resort will be Mattel Adventure Park, which is "coming soon," according to its website. It will be a 9-acre indoor and outdoor theme park with attractions like the Barbie Beach House with a Barbie Dream Closet Experience, and two Hot Wheels-themed roller coasters, the Hot Wheels Bone Shaker and the Hot Wheels Twin Mill Racer.

Airport News.....

Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport..... is introducing a new parking system to the Terminal 3 garage to help guide drivers to open spots and improve traffic flow. The camera-based system uses sensors to track parking spaces in real time, allowing drivers to receive accurate garage occupancy on each parking level. Drivers entering the garage will see green and red indicator lights, which will guide them toward open parking spaces on levels with availability. Green lights indicate open parking spaces, while the red lights indicate the sections of the lot that are full.

The goal of the new system is to reduce time spent searching for available spots and relieve traveler stress. It also supports the airport's sustainability goals by reducing drive and idling times in the parking garage. Phoenix Sky Harbor is working with parking manager ACE Parking on the new "Portier VISION" camera system, which is being piloted in the Terminal 3 garage on over 2,000 spaces. The airport is planning to extend the system to the larger Terminal 4 garage in the future.

Mesa Gateway Airport will offer passengers new routes, dining, hotels and airfield improvements in 2026. The east Mesa reliever for Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport has plans for enhancements that will manage growth and bolster the customer experience. These changes are necessary as airlines offer more flights in the new year, including three new Allegiant Air routes and capacity growth on seasonal Minneapolis flights from Sun Country Airlines, according to J. Brian O'Neill, Mesa Gateway's executive director.

It follows a record fiscal year for passenger traffic at Mesa Gateway, with more than 2 million people flying in and out of the airport from July 2024 to June 2025. Big growth in air cargo has also been good for the airport's business. Visit the website for more details on changes and future projects at Mesa Gateway Airport.
<https://www.gatewayairport.com/>

Sky Harbor plans..... to build a new terminal on the west side of the airport, where the former Terminals 1 and 2 were located, to accommodate increasing demand for flights to and from Arizona. The terminal is needed in part because American Airlines and Southwest Airlines want to expand their operations at Sky Harbor, but the existing terminals wouldn't offer them enough gates. American and Southwest operate a combined 70% of the airport's flight capacity.

Airport staff said the gates at Sky Harbor's two existing terminals were designed to handle crowds for smaller planes than the ones that fly today. Terminal 4, where American and Southwest operate their flights, opened in 1990; Terminal 3 opened in 1979. Terminal 4 has no more space for gates after the 2022 opening of an eight-gate Southwest concourse. A six-gate concourse in Terminal 3 is under construction and airport staff expect a late 2027 opening.

News from the Arizona Office of Tourism (AOT).....

Explore the Grand Canyon State your way with our Visit Arizona Experience Passes. Rock the Mother Road, discover over 50 Arizona Park locations, find family-friendly attractions or explore the supernatural side of Arizona. Sign up below for instant access to each passport on your mobile device.
<https://www.visitarizona.com/experiences/sports/spring-training>

Step up to the plate for an Arizona adventure that's a home run! We've scouted out the best ways to cover all your bases after the Spring Training game, from MVP-worthy eats to curveball attractions and hidden gems. This lineup is sure to knock it out of the park!
<https://www.visitarizona.com/experiences/sports/spring-training#>

When it comes to wellness retreats in the desert, there aren't many things more relaxing than a soak in a hot spring. Lucky for you, Arizona's wild lands boast several destinations where you can rest and rejuvenate. Here are eight of the best hot springs in Arizona. <https://www.visitarizona.com/like-a-local/the-soothing-powers-of-arizona-s-hot-springs>

Scottsdale Tourism Updates....

Scottsdale's mayor Lisa Borowsky called a special city council meeting in January to discuss Old Town tourism, and strengthening and preserving tourism in downtown Scottsdale.

The meeting focused on revitalizing Old Town, which she has called the "heart and soul" of the city. With the growth Scottsdale is seeing and concerns around construction and development, she says it's time to think about how to preserve what she considers an economic and tourism cornerstone.

The agenda included presentations from a Scottsdale historian, a tourism visioning expert, and a parking solutions specialist. After public comments, the council is considering creating a 15-member downtown task force. Borowsky says the task force would represent merchants, property owners, hoteliers, and tourism professionals from areas including Historic Old Town, Fifth Avenue, the Entertainment District, and the Arts District.

She says the task force will focus on evaluating and refining the downtown character area plan and future marketing efforts. Borowsky has been critical of the plan to build a three-story parking garage in Old Town, but construction on that is scheduled to begin this summer.

Sedona News

For all tourism activities in Sedona for 2026, you can always visit the Chamber of Commerce website: <https://visitsedona.com/events-calendar/annual-events/>

The City of Sedona will pay short-term rental owners to rent to long-term residents. Long after short-term rentals have taken over 15% of the city of Sedona's housing inventory, the Sedona City Council has unanimously moved to incentivize property owners to convert them to long-term rentals. At a meeting last summer, the City Council approved moving forward with the \$240,000 Rent Local pilot program, which will incentivize short-term rental owners to enter long-term leases with local workers.

<https://www.redrocknews.com/2022/08/19/city-of-sedona-will-pay-short-term-rental-owners-to-rent-to-long-term-residents/>

Of interest in Sedona As of Tuesday, Jan. 13, only one person has used the city of Sedona's Cold Weather Emergency Overnight Program since the contract was finalized with Catholic Charities on Aug. 3. The person stayed two nights local hotel at a cost of \$296.64 out the total \$15,000 allocation and was been entered into the Homeless Management Information System. The complete article can be viewed at:

<https://www.redrocknews.com/2026/01/20/sedona-hotel-program-for-homeless-sees-light-use/>

News from the Grand Canyon.....

Wildlife Conservation K-9 Project Every year, millions of visitors come face-to-face with elk and bighorn sheep in busy areas - hotel courtyards, roadways, even schoolyards. Over the past few decades, wildlife in the park has become extremely habituated to people, and the risk to both animals and visitors is now at an all-time high. Traditional hazing techniques have proven ineffective over the years, leaving managers with limited options for keeping wildlife and people safely separated.

That's where Blue, a specially trained Catahoula Leopard Dog, comes in, blazing a new trail in wildlife conservation. Thanks to generous support from GCC Members, Blue is spearheading the park's new Conservation K-9 Program, using safe, humane aversive conditioning to encourage elk and bighorn sheep to return to wild spaces. Visitors will have the rare opportunity to see Blue at work and learn why giving wildlife

room to roam is essential for their safety—and ours. Inspired by the highly successful program at Glacier National Park, Blue's presence taps into natural predator-prey instincts, guiding animals away from developed areas without harm. Her work helps restore healthy wildlife behavior, reduce human–wildlife conflict, and keep high-traffic park zones safer for everyone.

Arizona Water

Portions of the Arizona Canal on the north side of the Salt River will be drained from Jan. 8 to Feb. 7 for annual maintenance and construction activities from Mesa Drive to Recker Road between Camelback and Chaparral. Crews will inspect the canals, remove silt, replace concrete lining and repair gates along a stretch of seven to eight miles of the Arizona Canal located in Scottsdale and on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. They will also remove items that have been illegally thrown into the canal.

Signage will be posted where there will be increased construction traffic and portions of the canal will be closed to traffic including bikes and pedestrians. Some of SRP's northside irrigation customers will not receive water from the canals during the dry-up.

SRP is responsible for keeping its 131-mile canal system in operating condition during normal water deliveries to more than 2 million Valley residents. Each fall and winter, SRP performs dry-ups on portions of the canal system on a rotating 10-year schedule. Canal dry-ups allow SRP as well as other utilities and municipalities to perform construction and maintenance activities in and around the canals. SRP crews also will use the dry-up to examine the canals and underwater structures to look for evidence of invasive adult quagga mussels.

Crews will be in the canal during January using large nets to herd SRP's "smallest employees," the white amur fish. The fish will be loaded onto hauling tanks that will move them to other portions of the canal system. The weed-eating, white amur fish, are used by SRP to control aquatic vegetation in its 131-mile Valley canal system. Front loaders and heavy equipment will be used to pull silt, trash and dirt from the Arizona Canal and move it to large dump trucks throughout the dry-up. Crews can provide details on the oddest items pulled from the canals while stressing the importance of keeping the canals clean and safe.

<https://www.srpnet.com/grid-water-management/water-management/canal-management-maintenance>

Items of Interest

Arizona's 520 area code was expected to be retired in 2027, when the Arizona Corporation Commission estimated it would exhaust all phone numbers under the three-digit code. But Doug Clark, the commission's executive director, said utility staff have been able to preserve it for a bit longer by weeding out organizations using 520 for robocalls or spam and saving those numbers for the average consumer.

"Because we are now asking harder questions and monitoring that, some of those folks are less likely to utilize the 520 number because they know we're watching," Clark said. New 520 numbers could now be issued for another three years, Clark said, but eventually, southern Arizonans will need a new three-digit area code.

[Arizona currently has five area codes](#): 480, 520, 602, 623 and 928.

Arizona contains the most extended continually farmed land in the United States. Research done on soil and pollen east of the Grand Canyon in the Comanche and Nankoweap sites suggest that early Archaic people lived and farmed on these sites for at least a thousands years. Remnants of crops indicate that corn and cotton may have been grown on the sites. The first proven farms in what is now Arizona, were patches of maize planted by foragers in the floodplains of the Gila River. This area supported many civilizations like the Hohokam and Mogollon. These cultures planted maize, squash, cotton, and beans. In the 1600s, the Spanish had brought cattle to the New World that later in the century amounted in the hundreds of thousands, eventually making their way to Arizona over time.

Arizona Game and Fish.....

Invasive species..... threaten Arizona's land and water. What exactly is an 'invasive species'?

Invasive species are plants or wildlife that outcompete native wildlife, destroy local habitats and can throw ecosystems out of balance. Threats to wildlife include increased competition, predation, introduction of diseases and parasites, hybridization. Threats to landscapes include degradation of the environment and decreased biodiversity.

Invasive species in Arizona alter ecosystem balance and reduce biodiversity by outcompeting native plants, reducing the resources wildlife rely on and creating a cascading effect of lessened resources. Some invasive species grow rapidly, and then quickly dry out in the Arizona heat, increasing the risk of wildland fires.

There are eight invasive plants and grasses that top the invasive species watch list – some of the most invasive include:

Stinknet is a fast-growing plant that outcompetes native plants for resources. Originally from South Africa, this – aggressive plant has rapidly spread across the desert landscape, displacing native vegetation and impacting the ecosystem. It's noticeable by a distinctive odor, especially after rainfall, and is able to propagate quickly due to its signature yellow flowers that produce hundreds of seeds at a time.

Salt cedar, or tamarisk, is found along waterways and riparian areas. It was introduced for erosion control and ornamental purposes, but its rapid growth displaced native vegetation. It is able to thrive in saline soils and withstand drought conditions, which gives it the ability to outcompete native plants for resources and negatively impact water availability and quality, as it consumes large amounts of water and increases soil salinity due to the salt content of the leaves.

The endangered Mount Graham..... red squirrel population holds steady. The annual interagency survey of the endangered Mount Graham red squirrel in the Pinaleno Mountains of southeastern Arizona found the latest population estimate to be stable.

The survey, conducted jointly by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD), Coronado National Forest, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, resulted in an estimate of 232 squirrels compared to last year's count of 234. This consistency is particularly encouraging because it means that the population weathered a very dry 2025 on the mountain.

Annual red squirrel surveys focus on finding "middens" — areas where squirrels store their cones. This method allows biologists to systematically track where squirrels are and when they move to different areas.

The Mount Graham red squirrel population peaked at approximately 550 in the late 1990s. Typically ranging between 200 and 300 individuals, the population plummeted to approximately 35 squirrels after the 2017 Frye Fire. After years of steady growth, and a banner year of 90 new squirrels counted in 2023, the population is back within its typical range.

Listed as endangered in 1987, Mount Graham red squirrels live only in the upper elevation conifer forests of the Pinaleno Mountains and feed primarily on conifer seeds. They are highly territorial and have lower reproductive rates than other red squirrels. Long-term negative impacts on Mount Graham red squirrel population size and habitat include wildfire, insect infestations, competition with non-native Abert's squirrels, and poor pine cone crops caused by drought.



- You could pile four 1,300 foot skyscrapers on top of each other and they still would not reach the rim of the Grand Canyon.
- There are 11.2 million acres of National Forest in Arizona and 1/4 of the state is forested.
- The amount of copper utilized to make the copper dome atop Arizona's Capital building is equivalent to the amount used in 4.8 million pennies.
- The geographic center of Arizona is 55 miles southeast of Prescott near the community of Mayer.

- The Navajo Nation spans 27,000 square miles across the states of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico but its capital is seated in Window Rock, AZ.
- On June 6th, 1936, the first barrel of tequila produced in the United states rolled off the production line in Nogales AZ.
- The Sonoran Desert is the most biologically diverse desert in North America and the world.
- Arizona is the only state where you will find the four deserts in North America: Sonoran, Mohave, Chihuahuan, and Great Basin.

Education its essential and what we do!

NEW AGA Day Tour Another high-energy, hands-on field trip designed for people who love learning, storytelling, and unforgettable Arizona experiences, all at an amazing price offered only through AGA. Leaving from Tempe, AZ in a luxury bus, we'll make our way to Picacho Peak to feed ostriches & take an off-road tour, lunch in an authentic Cotton modular builder, and tour a cotton farm. Please see the attached flier and parking instructions for more details. Register before 2/1/2026! [2026 AGA Daytrip_ Ostriches, Monster Trucks & Desert History.pdf](#)

If you are interested in becoming AGA Certified for Arizona as a tour guide, and you have been a member for 1 year prior, you qualify to study for the test. The cost of the test information is \$10 and may be obtained from: Princely Nesadurai at pkntamil@yahoo.com. Your check should be payable to the Arizona Guides Association and marked for "Certification Test".

Benefits of AGA Certification:

- Gain confidence about Arizona history, geology, flora and fauna
- Become recognized by your peers as an exceptional source of information
- Heighten your visibility for career and job opportunities within the tourism industry

If there is a speaker or topic you would like AGA to bring to the membership please let the education committee know. Email: agaedprogram@gmail.com

Get Outside !!

Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area is in your backyard.....easy to advanced trails!
AND.....

South Mountain Park trailsthe largest municipal park in the country!
Both at <http://www.maricopacountyparks.net>

Websites to visit

Visit These 12 Incredible Charming Small Towns In Arizona, One For Each Month Of The Year
<https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/trip-ideas/arizona/12-small-towns-to-visit-this-year-az>

Take A Look At Life Inside Flagstaff, The Snowiest Town In Arizona
<https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/trip-ideas/arizona/snowiest-town-az?campaigni>

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