



TUCSON REGIONAL  
**TOWN HALL**  
*realizing the possibilities*

## **Tucson Regional Town Hall Two Years Later: A community's return on its investment**

**May 2009**

As the Tucson Regional Town Hall observes its second anniversary, strong forces have been unleashed for the betterment of the Tucson region. A series of six “community conversations” on critical issues brought together diverse leaders and advanced a much-needed spirit of inclusion and collaboration.

This creation of a “big table” at which stakeholders can convene to discuss vitally important issues alone would justify the expense in money, energy and time that thousands of Tucsonans have contributed to the Tucson Regional Town Hall. However, the Town Hall did not stop with just bringing Tucsonans together to discuss their values and concerns.

While each of the follow-up events have affected the region in meaningful ways, it is significant that the Tucson Regional Town Hall held in May of 2007 helped spawn the development of two entirely new organizations focused on literacy and education, the Literacy for Life Coalition and Tucson Values Teachers. In addition, the Town Hall has furthered essential community-wide discussions on topics ranging from water to arts to land-use.

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Such concrete steps reflect the importance of the Town Hall process – a process that creates an environment in which leaders and ordinary citizens can join together in an atmosphere of respect, dedication, thoughtfulness and optimism to tackle difficult issues and turn tough problems into opportunities.

In the past two years, the Tucson Regional Town Hall has become a tool for progress. The cooperative spirit driving the Tucson Regional Town Hall process has the potential to propel Tucson into a much brighter future. This interim report honors the thousands of involved residents who ultimately will energize and revitalize Tucson through their personal commitment and effort.

## Important results of the Tucson Regional Town Hall

Tucson Regional Town Hall follow-up events are organized around an ongoing series of “community conversations.” These events, open to all who wish to attend, are both educational and action-oriented. In the past two years, approximately 2,500 Tucsonans from across the community have joined together at Town Hall meetings to concentrate on important issues and opportunities facing Tucson.

In Tucson’s complex community, progress seldom can be tied to one event, one person or even one organization. But as the following description of events during the past two years makes clear, the Tucson Regional Town Hall is a unique, powerful force for improving the Tucson community.

**May 2007: The Tucson Regional Town Hall.** 165 Tucsonans met for nearly four days to discuss twelve critical issues facing the Tucson region. In this first step in a long journey toward creating a better community, the participants emphasized two things above all others: Solutions to many of the area’s problems must be regional in scope, and the community’s top priority should be to improve education.

**June 2007: Unveiling of the Town Hall report.** 420 Tucsonans, many of whom were unable to attend the May event, met at the Fox Theatre for the initial public presentation of the Tucson Regional Town Hall Report. Attendees participated in a live television broadcast while providing feedback that has informed future Community Conversations.

**Oct. 2007: Water.** 300 people from diverse backgrounds participated in the “Community Conversation on Water.” This primarily educational event emphasized the need for a regional approach to water issues. Shortly after this event the City of Tucson and Pima County undertook a regional water study, and eleven business organizations formed the Tucson Regional Water Coalition.

**Nov. 2007: Literacy.** Under the leadership of the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona, the region’s literacy groups met with 125 local citizens and concluded that literacy is not just an educational

issue, but a community issue. Two years later, the newly formed Literacy for Life Coalition is poised to “move the needle” on this critical issue. “The Tucson Regional Town Hall was made up of community leaders, business leaders, political leaders and average citizens,” says Executive Director Martha Gilliland. “This diverse group made a strong statement that literacy was a priority for our region. Formation of the Literacy for Life Coalition would not have been possible without the broad-based support that grew out of the Tucson Regional Town Hall.”

“Formation of the Literacy for Life Coalition would not have been possible without the broad-based support that grew out of the Tucson Regional Town Hall.” – Dr. Martha Gilliland, executive director, Literacy for Life Coalition.

**March 2008: Arts and Culture.** A “great spirit of cooperation and a tremendous amount of passion” marked the “Community Conversation on Arts and Culture,” at which 160 participants from business, the community at large and artists all agreed that the

future of our region depends on a vigorous and vital arts community. Tucson Pima Arts Council Executive Director Roberto Bedoya called the Community Conversation on Arts and Culture “a launching point for the Pima Cultural Plan which led us to join with the Metropolitan Tucson Convention and Visitors Bureau to develop the [www.showup.com](http://www.showup.com) web site for all arts and entertainment activities in Tucson. Most important, we learned that we must focus on what can we do together as a region rather than what we can do alone.”

**May 2008: Early Childhood Education.** A “quite remarkable” gathering of over 400 participants gathered for the “Community Conversation on Early Childhood Education,” which prompted a national leader to remark, “I have never seen anything like this.” Participants strongly supported the following statement by Town Hall Chairman Peter Likins: “If we don’t get early childhood education right, then we can’t get anything right.” This event helped to launch the First Things First initiative in Southern Arizona. Lavonne Deville of United Way credits the Tucson Regional Town Hall with “taking our work in Early Education to another level...one that we would not have reached without it. The Community Conversation on Early Childhood was a real catalyst for early education in our region.”

**Oct. 2008: Tucson Values Teachers.** Nearly 500 Tucsonans gathered at the “State of Education” luncheon to participate in the launching of Tucson Values Teachers (TVT), a region-wide initiative dedicated to helping Tucson attract, support and retain the very best teachers for every classroom. TVT’s long-term goal is to “create an education-first community” in which children are prepared to fill high wage jobs and choose to stay in Tucson for its high quality of life. Under the leadership of Executive Director Jacquelyn Jackson, TVT is providing more than 20 teachers with paid summer internships at local corporations, and it is providing all teachers with “Summer Breaks for Teachers,” an innovative incentive card offering teachers significant discounts on a variety of purchases. Longer term, TVT is seeking other opportunities to allow teachers to improve their professional skills, and Voices for Education has taken the lead on seeking new revenue to raise teacher salaries.

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**Dec. 2008: Land-use.** More than 450 Tucsonans gathered for a Community Conversation on Land-use that emphasized the need for trust and regional thinking among local jurisdictions. Featuring leaders from the region’s jurisdictions, the “conversation” spurred talk of cooperatively coming together to create a regional plan on water and growth. “We need to have the water issue resolved,” said Tucson Mayor Bob Walkup, while Pima County Board of Supervisors Chairman Richard Elias emphasized the need to be concerned about the quality of growth, and Oro Valley Mayor Paul Loomis insisted planning is key to establishing a community’s character. The idea of a “values-based vision” for our region was born at this event, and a number of groups are meeting to determine the next steps, based on the values of our citizens, that will help shape our region.

## Making it possible for thousands to participate

In the past two years, thousands of Tucsonans have participated in the Tucson Regional Town Hall. Some attended the original Town Hall in May 2007. Others attended follow-up Community Conversations on topics in which they were particularly interested. And even others responded to the Community Voice surveys, an online survey created by the Tucson Regional Town Hall to ensure that every person in the Tucson region would have an opportunity to speak out and be heard on critical Tucson issues.

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In the two years since the initial Town Hall, Tucsonans have used the Community Voice surveys to express their opinions on community values, Downtown Tucson, literacy, arts and culture, and education and teachers. The two most recent surveys were on arts and education.

In September 2008, the Arts and Culture Community Voice survey reported that residents believe arts and culture are important aspects of a high quality of life and want a simpler way to learn about cultural offerings. Another significant finding was the necessity of finding ways to reach out to minorities and younger people, who especially felt they were not aware of arts and cultural opportunities.

Then in December 2008, Community Voice respondents put education at the top of the list of important priorities in building and maintaining a strong community. A full 95 percent of the

The two most recent Community Voice surveys revealed great respect and concern for the quality of Tucson's arts and culture and the region's ability to attract highly competent teachers and provide students an excellent education.

Community Voice respondents believe that the education system is central to the economic future of the region. This finding once more reaffirmed the belief of the initial Tucson Regional Town Hall participants that education should be the region's top priority. Moreover, it highlights the value of such community-wide initiatives as the Literacy for Life Coalition and Tucson Values Teachers.

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