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TOP STORY

After years in public life, veteran EV leader runs for office

By Gary Nelson Tribune Contributor 14 hrs ago



East Valley civic and business leader Roc Arnett last week filed petitions to run for the county community college district governing board.

Gary Nelson/ Tribune Contributor

His friendly baritone has echoed through vast meeting halls packed with virtually every mover and shaker who calls the East Valley home.

It has led those same leaders to embrace visions of a regional future far grander than any civic booster had previously imagined.

And it has wheedled countless dollars out of some very deep pockets for the sake of bringing those visions to life.

Now, if Roc Arnett has his way, his will become one of seven voices on the Maricopa County Community College District governing board.

While the board may toil in the shadows of public awareness, few match its direct annual impact on literally hundreds of thousands

of lives.

Arnett is one of two candidates for an at-large seat on the seven-member board. The other is Kathleen Winn of Mesa, an activist who fights human trafficking and who ran unsuccessfully for a City Council seat in 2016. The incumbent, Tracy Livingston of Peoria, is a Republican candidate for state superintendent of public instruction.

Although this – at age 76, no less – is Arnett's first run at elected public office, he's no political neophyte.

For one thing, there was his tenure, in 1963, as the first student body president of what's now called Mesa Community College. Since Arnett would be overseeing that school if he wins the November election, his current campaign represents a return, if you will, to his political roots.

Far more significantly for the history of the region, Arnett made his mark as president of the East Valley Partnership for 13 years. The nonprofit coalition of governments, businesses, schools and individuals is a prominent nonpartisan voice for an area whose population rivals that of Phoenix proper.

The job put Arnett on a first-name basis with governors, legislators, mayors and city officials from across the political spectrum.

This is not something that happens to the typical insurance salesman – and it wasn't exactly planned.

Arnett's salesman father moved his family to Mesa in 1950 from Franklin, Arizona (2010 population: 92). Arnett notes proudly that it's the same eastern Arizona neighborhood that produced former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. "She and I have talked about it," he said.

Arnett followed the well-traveled path from Mesa High School to Brigham Young University, but he didn't thrive there. "I did graduate 'Magnum Ukulele,'" he said. "I learned to play the ukulele well, but that's about all I learned."

After leaving BYU, Arnett served a two-year church mission to New York City. Returning to Mesa, he figured he needed more schooling and enrolled in the first class at Mesa Junior College.

The little school operated then out of the former church building at Main Street and Extension Road that later became the Landmark restaurant.

During his freshman year there, Arnett was hired by an insurance agent. "I started selling and I didn't need to go to college for that," Arnett said. "I was making money left and right."

But his big break came at age 22 when the guy who hired him got busted for fraud. Arnett had the first right to buy the agency. After a few years, the chance to write policies for the White Mountain Apache Tribe put him on solid financial ground.

It was a 38-year insurance career during which Arnett and his wife, Sydney, welcomed five children and Arnett stayed busy with such family-oriented activities as scouting.

His involvement with the East Valley Partnership dates back to 1996, and that led to his appointment by Gov. Fife Symington to the State Transportation Board in the same year.

After his six-year term on the transportation board, the Partnership asked him to become its first full-time, paid president.

"I said, 'You guys can't pay me enough. I've done quite well, thank you very much.' Then I realized I had been in the insurance business 38 years. I had turned 60, and maybe it was time to do something different and give back to the community."

Besides, Arnett said, Partnership reps told him they had plenty of money.

"Well, when I showed up, they were overdrawn by 10 grand. So I had to start singing for my supper, which I did for almost 14 years."

Arnett was the Partnership's public face during any number of well-attended community economic forums and other programs designed to boost the region. But he lists three major initiatives that he believes will leave a lasting mark:

A landmark study that explored options for 275 square miles of state trust land in Pinal County called Superstition Vistas. The study led to master-planning efforts now in place designed to ensure orderly growth in the region should it ever be developed.

A study by the Urban Land Institute in 2006 that helped open eyes to the potential of the Gateway area in Mesa, Gilbert and Queen Creek.

A “rebranding” program under which the Partnership began referring to the East Valley as “PHX East Valley,” a bow to the reality that few outside Arizona recognize the names of the region’s individual cities.

All along, despite his own spotty college career, Arnett has advocated for education, recognizing that the days when lucrative insurance agencies could land in a 22-year-old’s lap are long gone.

That passion for education fuels Arnett’s ambition to join the community college district board. The responsibility, he said, is awesome.

“When you add up the physical plant of all the buildings, I figure it’s about a \$9 billion or \$10 billion physical plant,” he said. “That’s bigger than ASU. ... What’s the return on investment? That’s a concern of mine.”

In addition to educating some 200,000 people a year, the district, by Arnett’s estimate, produces an economic impact of \$6 billion to \$7 billion annually across the county.

“It’s a phenomenal asset to our community,” Arnett said. “One of the things that has motivated me is that education is the strongest driver in our entire economy.”

Arnett is not happy with some of the direction he sees coming from the current board.

A faculty group filed an \$850,000 claim against the district this year after the board terminated the district’s “meet and confer” process for negotiating salaries and benefits.

The process had been in place for 40 years.

Arnett, noting his endorsement by the MCCC faculty, said, “There needs to be a method whereby collective problem-solving is moved forward.”

Arnett also is concerned about rumblings by some board members about possibly closing the Red Mountain campus of Mesa Community College. Staff at that campus are working hard to ensure its viability, he said, and Mesa has touted it as the northern leg of a “Power Road Knowledge Corridor” that includes several other post-secondary institutions.

Arnett hopes to use his formidable cheerleading skills to boost a district that faces growing competition from Arizona State University, Grand Canyon University and even from church-sponsored college placement programs that may pull students out of the county.

“I applaud (ASU President) Michael Crow for all the things he has done and is doing and will continue to do,” Arnett said. “With that, then, comes the fact that he’s eating the community colleges’ lunch.”

In aiming to join the board, Arnett hopes to follow the lead of such past civic giants as Ross Farnsworth and Dwight Patterson, who were early community college advocates.

Plus, it’s personal.

“I’ve got 20 grandkids,” Arnett said, and he wants to ensure for them a full range of opportunities.

“The other thing is, I need something to do. If I sat here all day, I’d die. And I don’t want to die.”

