

Creativity still key as Smith approaches 2nd Mesa mayoral term

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By Sierra Palmer, Special to Tribune |

If you're looking for the Mayor of Mesa, you won't find him inside the box of old thinking.

According to city staff and regional leaders, Mayor Scott Smith has transformed the City of Mesa with his out-of-the-box recipe for success.

"Figure out who you are, figure out what you do well, and do it even better. Never ever try to be something you're not," Mayor Smith said. "Just be great at what you do."

Shelly Allen, a 30-year employee for the city of Mesa and former assistant economic development director, said that Smith's ability to relate to residents makes him great at what he does.

"The citizens of Mesa believe that Scott is one of their own, people believe in him, are inspired by him and trust that he has Mesa's best interest at heart." Allen said.

Although he was student body president at Mesa's Westwood High School in 1974, Smith said he never planned on pursuing a political career

But he saw Mesa slipping from the great place he remembers growing up in and, in 2008, jumped at the opportunity to transform the city he loved.

"People joke that my high school was a lot like "Glee." We were the No. 1 ranked football team in the state and we had starters on that team that were also in the honor choir. I was one of those," Smith said. "It was a place where you could do different things and it was encouraged. That set the stage for me and made me willing to take chances, not be locked into one way of thinking."

After being elected, Smith decided to utilize his high school "Glee" mentality in the way he ran his city; that means taking new approaches and trying different strategies to stimulate the Mesa community.

In addition to working to bring new universities to Downtown Mesa, helping keep the Chicago Cubs in the city, and attracting aerospace partners, Smith has utilized technology to engage the community.

One such venture: iMesa, unveiled in 2011 to serve as an online forum for community members to weigh in on policies, submit their own ideas, and vote on others' suggestions in order to better involve the citizens in the decisions of their city.

"My hopes were that the community could imagine a community they wanted, invest in the community, and that would lead to improvement in the community," Smith said. "We have had a couple of very significant successes that would probably would have never come to be without iMesa."

A few of these successes include a community-inspired urban garden in Downtown Mesa as well as an "idealab" known as HeatSync Labs that focuses on healthcare, education, aerospace, tourism and technology in Mesa.

Another new approach the mayor has undertaken is a 2012 "StartUp Mesa Initiative," aimed at make Mesa the most business-friendly city in America.

The City of Mesa has partnered with the Mesa Chamber of Commerce to help businesses identify problems and create solutions for start up and expansion.

“When citizens have a great job, other problems in a community take care of themselves,” Smith explained. “That’s why business growth and commercial opportunities are important for us.”

Roc Arnett, CEO of the East Valley Partnership, has worked with Smith on city business projects over the years and describes him as a “breath of fresh air to the city of Mesa.”

Arnett said he appreciates the “vivid blend of a background” that the mayor has had working as an accountant, a lawyer, president of a homebuilders associations and a businessman. He believes that his upbringing has allowed the mayor to get creative – to think outside the box.

“Other mayors have been good caretakers, but Mayor Smith is an entrepreneurial mayor that takes chances,” Arnett said. “When he took office, Mesa was known as a bedroom community – broad streets, narrow minds. He came into office with an attitude to change that.”

Pat Esparza, partnership programs coordinator for Mesa Community College, has lived in the city most of her life; she was asked to serve on the mayor’s group of advisors for his 2008 campaign.

“His ability to pull people in on a concept with a powerful set of persuasion and negotiation skills and turn it into a business proposal or activity makes projects like iMesa and StartUp Mesa so successful.” Esparza said.

Although Smith will be finishing his first term in January 2013, he ran unopposed in his election for a second term on Aug. 28 and will now hold his position until January 2017.

In 2013, he will become the president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors where he pledges to work hard at getting the city of Mesa recognized nationally.

“I want to continue to put Mesa at the forefront. To make Mesa a city that people know throughout the country for things other than sunshine,” Smith said. “I want them to know about what we are accomplishing here.”

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