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Budget pain slams Mesa recreation, parks

BY CECILIA CHAN

Tribune Managing Editor

Shortening hours at Red Mountain Center, eliminating open gym on Fridays at Eagles Community Center and raising fees are some of the proposals to cut costs and increase revenue in the Mesa Park and Recreation Department.

Under the city manager's direction, most departments were required to cut their spending by a net 2% as Mesa faces rising

operating costs and a loss in revenue for the fiscal year that begins July 1. Various departments will present their budgets in the coming weeks.

The Parks Department needed to shave \$800,000 from its base budget and also find \$1.3 million to cover the cost for part-time staffing.

To get to the cost reduction, the department's proposals included eliminating city funding for the annual Pow Wow event and reducing the frequency of landscape ser-

vices in basins. It also is anticipating over \$300,000 in revenue from increases to some fees and charges that went into effect this month.

"We're also proposing to close Fremont Pool after this summer," said Andrea Moore, director of parks, recreation and community facilities at a council study session. "This would be our last summer of operations."

The pool at the Fremont Junior High

SEE PARKS PAGE 13

Opponents decry MPS trans notification proposal

BY CECILIA CHAN

Tribune Managing Editor

An overwhelming number of students, teachers, parents and community members sounded off last week against Mesa Public Schools' proposed "Gender Dysphoria Policy," contending that it targets and harms transgender students.

Governing board member and retired teacher Sharon Benson proposed the policy, which includes notifying parents if their students ask to go by a pronoun or name different from their biological sex and requiring students participate in activities or facility use, such as bathrooms, that align with their sex at birth.

After hearing from the public, the board directed the policy

SEE MPS PAGE 6

Fading Treasure



Cheryl Harbertson invests labor, love and money in her family's orange grove in Mesa — and it's a good thing. Development is quickly eating away at land once laden with orange groves in the city, as you'll read on page 17. (AnnElise Makin/Tribune Contributor)

Mesa's orange groves becoming relics of bygone age

BY ANNELISE MAKIN
Tribune Contributor

The orange season is over and may soon be gone for good in Mesa.

Citrus, once a significant part of the economy in Arizona, has been on a long-term decline since the 1970s.

In 2002, the National Agricultural Statistics Service reported 28,290 acres bearing citrus for Arizona. In 2024, only 3,100 acres were counted statewide. In Maricopa County in 2002 citrus covered 7,042 acres. Five years later, in 2007, that dwindled to 2,042 acres. No more acreage reports are available after that.

Mesa's orange groves, too, have been disappearing since the 1980s. Over the last two years, the remaining groves appear to have been shrinking even faster.

At the former Citrus Heights loca-



At The Orange Patch Too at 3825 E. McKellips Road, manager, Kaye Hunsaker tends to bins filled with a disappearing commodity in Mesa – home-grown oranges. Hunsaker is diversifying her offerings with gift items, home decorations, and specialty foods. (AnnElise Makin/Tribune Contributor)

tion, the Orange King Lion statue has been caged by construction fencing for Brightpath Childcare. Across from it, at the northeast corner of Brown and Val Vista, 9 acres of the former Oasis Citrus groves have been razed.

Near Falcon Field Airport, 18 acres of groves made way for a company called Greenfield Industrial. A bit farther west on McDowell Road, across from 38th Place, 20 acres of former groves are for sale.

B&B Citrus on Val Vista Drive closed early this year due to the lack of fruit. The Burden Orchards, about 28 acres, made way for a large-scale housing development. The remaining 4 acres will serve as an agritainment district between Jalapeño Buck's barbecue and the B&B store.

Tyler Ranch on Val Vista on the north side of the Red Mountain Loop

SEE RELICS PAGE 18



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RELICS

FROM PAGE 17

202 is now a 160- single-family subdivision. The farm used to produce citrus trees, seeds and fruit.

Mesa's orchards may be too few to count. In 2022, the Mesa Tribune reported 25 citrus farms operating on 561 acres in Mesa. In 2025, about half that number are left.

Regardless, the Orange Patch on Gilbert Road near Thomas Road, has been operating for 50 years when it's opened for the season. Allen and Shelly Freeman run the citrus store. In the 1960s, Allen's father, Art Freeman, with the Kaser family, started a 240-acre orchard close to the Salt River.

"But then they built the 202 Freeway right through the groves," Shelly said. "So, we lost about half our orchards. We are currently leasing 108 acres."

Five years ago, The Orange Patch again experienced retreat. The store had to be moved from its original location at Lehi Road farther "out back" on Gilbert Road.

Even worse, "next month we will be down to 52 acres," said Allen Freeman, 65. The land owners have put a large swath of the land on the market.

Perched on his tractor, he prophesied about the future of Mesa orange groves: "They will all be housing projects."

And what about The Orange Patch?

"It will be a shorter season," the citrus farmer said. None of the Freeman children are interested in continuing the business. As it is, no packing facilities are left in the area.

The historic 7,000-square-foot Sunkist Citrus Warehouse on 7 acres on Broadway Road has given way to other businesses.

Add to that the expense of water, labor and fertilizer and many owners say it only makes sense to sell their groves.

The City of Mesa, across from Falcon Field Airport along Greenfield and McKellips roads, still owns the largest citrus patch in town.

"We have worked the city groves for over 20 years," Ryan Mittendorf said. He and his two brothers followed their father, David Mittendorf, into farming the recently discontinued Ar-



Snowbird harvesters from Manitoba, Canada, earlier this year visited The Orange Grove in Lehi because they love to get their hands on Mesa's home-grown fruit. (AnnElise Makin/Tribune Contributor)

minstead groves.

"We are now on a year-to-year contract with the city," Mittendorf said.

The brothers sell their harvest locally or to distributors in California. For a while, they had specialized in organic methods but not any longer.

Asked what will be the future for the Mesa orange stands, Mittendorf projected, "B&B Citrus and the others will continue with oranges from Fort McDowell."

The Orange Patch Too, a popular boutique for specialty foods, home décor, and gift items on McKellips Road, relies on Mittendorf's citrus beside its own.

Kaye Hunsaker, a sister of Allen Freeman, runs the store with another sister, Michelle Smith.

"After our parents started the business in the 60s, this became a big operation in the 70s. They used the large Sunkist packaging house that still stands," Hunsaker said. In the early 80s, their parents split the property up among multiple owners.

"When I was a teenager, we sold mainly citrus, dates and food items," Hunsaker recalled. "Then mom brought in gift items to stay open year-round."

At one point or another, all seven of the Freeman siblings have worked in the business.

Cheryl and Brent Harbertson live

on a one-of-a-kind family citrus oasis, growing mostly navel oranges and some grapefruit and lemon. At The Orange Grove on Recker Road, they care for 500 trees on 5 acres.

The Orange Grove is a big draw for snowbirds, lured by the rustic charm of what could be called an original form of agritainment. While the grownup harvesters fan out with orange picker-poles, children shoot hoops in the courtyard.

Cheryl gladly shared her orange growing experience.

"My father purchased the house and 3 acres 50 years ago," Cheryl said.

After the parents passed away, she took over the grove and bought more adjoining land.

"At one point, I got really tired of picking the oranges," Cheryl recalled. "So, I decided to have people come and help. And at the end of our season, the Gilbert Rotary Club comes in. Last year they picked 1,600 pounds of navel oranges for the Midwestern Food Bank."

She understands why growers are quitting.

"Well, there's obviously more money in commercial properties," Cheryl said. "Fertilizer has gone up like crazy. So why mess with a citrus grove? But for everybody else, it's hurtful. It hurts the environment. It's food that we eat."

Cheryl's mother-in-law, Donna Jeane Brundage Harbertson, who died at age 94 in 2012, was Arizona's first Citrus Queen.

Cheryl hoped that her daughter will continue with the orange groves. "She is really into horticulture," she explained.

But growing oranges, like any farming, can be a struggle. "Since these orchards were started, lots of trees have died," Cheryl said.

Still, she wants to keep the groves going despite the many challenges. At times, her property has experienced vagrants and vandalism.

"Some people think the oranges belong to the city and just pick them," she said.

In the end, the City of Mesa may soon be not only the largest but also the only citrus grower in town.

"Mesa itself owns approximately 80 acres of citrus," said Mayor Mark Freeman, a cousin of the Freeman citrus growers. "It's a buffer for the Falcon Field Airport. It provides a safety net for aircraft and it will stay that way for the near future."

The glory days may be gone, but there is some hope for oranges, be it in the store, agritainment, landscaping or as a safety buffer.

Arizona oranges, kissed by the hot Valley sun, are the best. Every snowbird knows that. ■

Community

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100+ Women support cancer recover center

BY KIM TARNOPOLSKI

Tribune Guest Writer

In a world where hope and healing often feel like distant dreams for those battling breast cancer, there exists a beautiful organization that offers both comfort and strength through the power of nature.

Casting for Recovery is a unique program that brings together women who are navigating the journey of breast cancer recovery through a therapeutic combination of fly-fishing and community.

Founded in 1998, Casting for Recovery has touched the lives of thou-



Celebrating 100+ Women's gift to Casting for Recovery are, from left, Kara Medlock, Crissy Haidos, Karen Gremminger, Katherine Katz, Patty Nix. (Kim Tarnopolski)

sands of women across the United States. The organization's mission is simple but profound: to provide women with breast cancer the opportunity to heal physically, emotionally, and spiritually in an environment that promotes relaxation, connection, and empowerment.

The retreats are offered free of charge, ensuring that any woman — regardless of financial situation — has the chance to experience this life-changing experience.

The magic of Casting for Recovery lies in its blend of fly-fishing and well-

SEE WOMEN PAGE 22

EV artist devotes exhibit to fruit trees

BY ANNELISE MAKIN

Tribune Contributor

Martin Dimitrov paints what surrounds him in plain sight. For his recent exhibit, "Nocturnal Garden," — on display until today, April 13, at the Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum — the Tempe painter made the fruit trees of his backyard his subject.

"I paint from nature at night because I work during the day," Dimitrov said.

His daytime work and two young children, 3 and 6, took his artistic pursuit into the night and his exhibit was painted over four years.

The largest canvas, "Portrait of a Lemon Tree," took Dimitrov a year to finish.

"It's hypnotizing," one observer said. "After a minute of looking at it, you feel the 110-plus degrees of night-time heat and notice a slight rustling in the leaves."

"I find beauty everywhere," Dimitrov said. "Over time, the changes in my paintings accumulate. I try to keep it

quiet, but there are always subtle changes reflected in them."

Dimitrov came to the United States via Florida as a student from Bulgaria in 2000. He earned a computer science degree and has worked in computers ever since.

He started painting about 15 years ago, taking night classes at an art school in Scottsdale.

"I have always loved painting and I paint almost every day," he said.

By intention or default, the trees in his backyard were his models.

"I strive to develop a relationship with my subject matter," Dimitrov said. "I do have a bunch of citrus trees, lemon, grapefruit, tangelos, and mandarins in my backyard. If the trees were different, I would have different subjects. I find beauty everywhere."

"Two of my peach trees, which I painted for this exhibit, died in last year's record heat," he said, adding that he feels those trees will now live forever in his paintings. ■



Martin Dimitrov works on his painting, "Portrait of a Lemon Tree." (AnnElise Makin)