

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH CITY

BY LAINE SEATON

Getting due recognition when you're not the biggest or best known is truly an honor. Having the chance to set the bar for other U.S. cities to follow goes straight into rock star territory. Just ask the folks at the city of Cottonwood. In February 2015, Cottonwood was chosen among 16 Arizona cities and towns as the winner of the inaugural Sustainable Economic Growth City of the Decade Award.

Created through a partnership of VerdeXchange AZ – a collaboration of entrepreneurs, business and civic leaders, and global investors who are shaping the future through innovations and public policies – in addition to the Arizona Commerce Authority (ACA), the award is a tangible way to recognize communities who are embracing “smart growth” and taking it seriously. Mayor of Cottonwood, Diane Joens, played an integral part in the process by sharing the city's sustainable initiatives with the award committee.

“I was blown away by what the city of Cottonwood has accomplished,” said VerdeXchange CEO, Maryanne Weiss, who was part of the judging panel along with representatives from APS, SRP and ACA. “They [Cottonwood] were incredibly creative in how they dealt with all of the issues, and they went far beyond the competition.”

Weiss is referring to the three major focus areas upon which each contender was judged: sustainability measures, transit/walkability and economic growth. A terrific example of what made Cottonwood stand out from the rest includes their dedication to – or perhaps obsession with – pure water. Their water reclamation plant removes all traces of pharmaceuticals

from the city's water supply, a level that's virtually unheard of in most cities. The plant is also 100 percent solar powered.

“Thinking about how the environment and sustainability can tie into economics – that's what we're doing,” commented Casey Rooney, Economic Development Director for the city of Cottonwood. “We don't want to be just another tourist community, but an exceptional community for sustainability – a model for the world.”

Economic growth and business development was another area where Cottonwood surged from the pack. “I'm really proud of how we've been able to revitalize our downtown (Old Town) area,” said Rooney. “Most of the original buildings have been re-purposed for new local business, and it's great. Eight years ago, no one wanted to be here. Now it's beautiful and walkable, and people want to live [and visit] here,” he said.

The VerdeXchange/ACA award recognition is unique in that it's not just another green award given for changing to CFL bulbs, recycling or going solar. No doubt, these efforts are good, but Cottonwood's focus firmly aligns sustainability with economics.

“Green is money. Sustainability is another way to grow the bottom line,” said Weiss. “The thing is you have to have the knowledge to know what to do with it. Green is not an either/or proposition anymore.”

Now that Arizona and the city of Cottonwood have set the bar for what's truly possible in creating a sustainable city, Weiss hopes that other cities across the country will take notice, get inspired and take action. Rooney agrees. “What's good for Cottonwood is good for other communities,” he said. “We want to be a model for the Verde Valley and for the world, but you have to start in your own backyard. It's about using the assets you already have to make it better.” ■

For more information, visit cottonwoodaz.gov, vaz.com and azcommerce.com.

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