

# 5 years later, vibrant downtown emerges

*Scottsdale Republic Editorial March 13, 2008*

*Second of six parts*

For a full week in February, ESPN's viewers were treated to views of Camelback Mountain and Scottsdale's Waterfront. Sports stars and entertainment celebrities strutted into the city's downtown nightspots after raising money for charity on Scottsdale's golf courses.

The Super Bowl may have been played in Glendale, but in the week leading up to the game, Scottsdale was the place to be.

What a difference five years makes.

When the "Which Way Scottsdale?" report was released in 2003, downtown was aging poorly. "It's not the cutting-edge downtown of the region. That honor belongs to Tempe," the report's authors noted with brutal honesty.

Many in Scottsdale did not see it that way, the report noted. By a narrow margin, they picked their downtown over Phoenix and Tempe as the Valley's most significant entertainment district. But the rest of the Valley said Tempe and Phoenix were miles ahead.

"The report highlighted the issue of lost cachet," said John Little, who a year later became the city's first executive director for downtown issues. "You don't just get cachet. You have to earn and build on it."

It was a wake-up call. The city turned its focus sharply on downtown. The renaissance since then is the greatest success to flow from "Which Way Scottsdale?"

## **City comes together downtown**

Why, among the many suggestions in the report, is this the one that was most taken to heart? For starters, downtown is Scottsdale's commons. The city may be three communities in one, as "Which Way Scottsdale?" asserted, but downtown is where everything comes together.

City government tried for years to pump life into the area. It floated grandiose plans like the one to turn a desert downtown into a facsimile of Venice. It altered Scottsdale Road to make room for the Galleria. It declared the area blighted and a candidate for condemnation, which only suppressed revitalization.

Finally, city leaders realized the best thing they could do was get out of the way. The City Council lifted the condemnation threat. It built parking garages. And "Which Way Scottsdale?" accelerated a change in thinking.

“The stars lined up,” said Rick Kidder, president of the Scottsdale Area Chamber of Commerce. “We were reeling post-9/11. The community was fearful. There was not as much business and personal travel. People were stopping discretionary spending. City revenue was dropping. The report became a framework for a time when Scottsdale became more flexible.”

When the report came out, Starwood Capital Group was working on the condo towers that became the Waterfront. A more flexible City Council's approval of what had previously been impossible heights turned heads. Scottsdale was open for business.

The result is a downtown no one could have imagined five years ago, much less a decade or two.

### **‘Funky’ opportunities surfaced**

“Which Way Scottsdale?” had offered this prescription:

“By abandoning the traditional idea of downtown Scottsdale as a high-end retail and touristy location, and focusing instead on the somewhat ‘funky’ opportunities provided by unique arts and culture, live-work spaces, even research facilities, the city could reposition downtown — and south Scottsdale — more broadly within the region in a way that will help it prosper in the 21st century.”

That describes today's downtown, except it doesn't abandon high-end retail and touristy attractions. It is a unique mix of old and new.

“The market drove the way the space would be defined,” Kidder said. “The result is a vibrant urbanism that manages to coexist with the old. Those that wanted the old fought hard to keep it. Those that wanted something fresher found a way to make it work together.”

That mix — the product of a debate that continues today — is what brought ESPN and all those Super Bowl parties to town.

“What is uniquely Scottsdale?” asked Rachel Sacco, president and CEO of the Scottsdale Convention & Visitors Bureau. “Until we become clear about that, it is too easy to copy other downtowns. Tempe was unique in that market. Scottsdale was successful in coming up with something unlike any other downtown. When visitors go there, it's not like their downtown back home. It's not like any downtown they've visited.”

The formula that produced it can't be replicated elsewhere. But we should hold onto it, because one truth from “Which Way Scottsdale?” always rings true: You can't sit on your lead.