

Parks & Recreation

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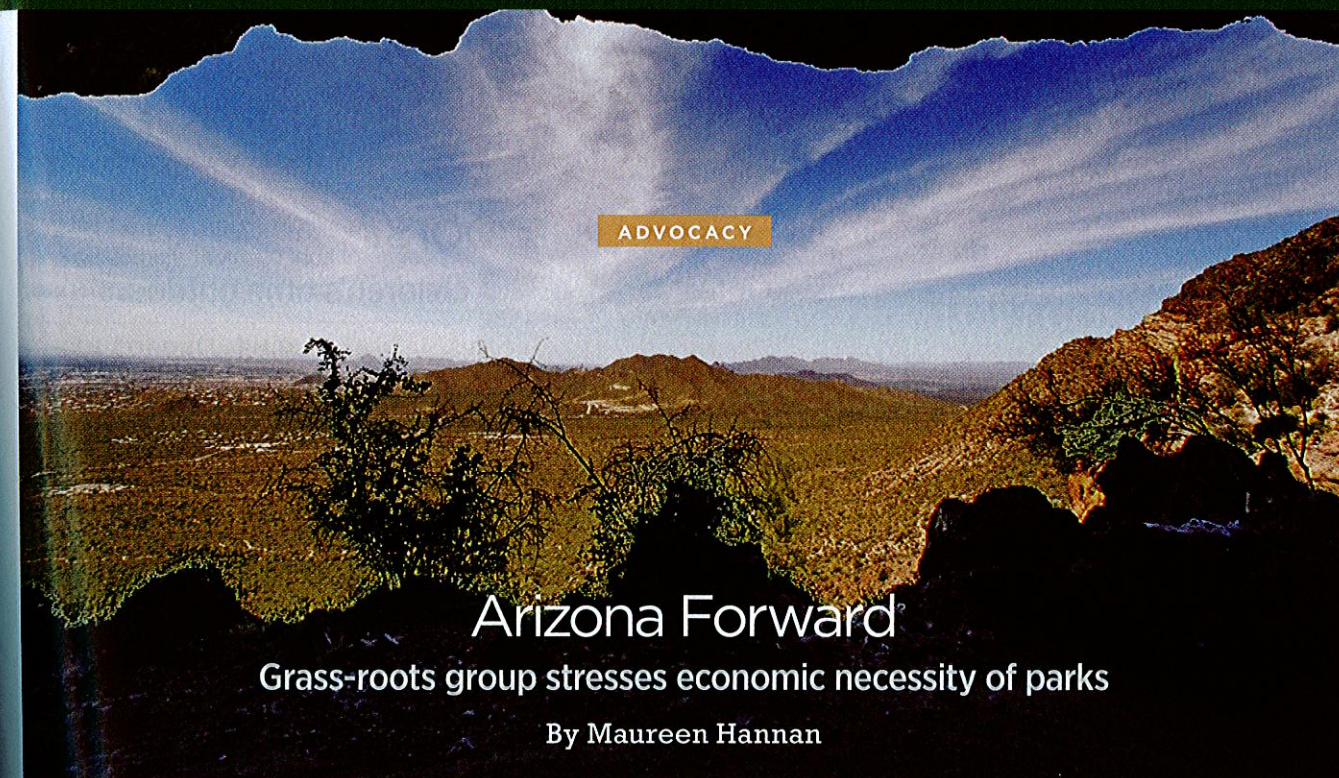


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ADVOCACY

Arizona Forward Grass-roots group stresses economic necessity of parks

By Maureen Hannan

Seldom does a park-supporting citizen group conduct statewide economic impact studies or launch voter education campaigns. Arizona Forward, though, is not about traditional park activism. The group, a coalition of citizens, businesses, and universities, was chartered at the beginning of this year as a voice for balance between economic growth and environmental quality. As envisioned, Arizona Forward will promote cooperative efforts to improve the livability, sustainability and economic vitality of cities and towns throughout the state. The group decided to focus on the parks and open space issue as its first project, after funds supposedly dedicated to parks and wilderness protection (including park entrance fees and monies set aside from the state lottery) were swept by state lawmakers into the general appropriations fund. As a result, state park funding was devastated—and only a few small grants and individual partnerships were left for parks without direct funding.

One of the state's 27 parks is still closed, five others now operate on limited hours, and 14 are open only because of support from municipalities and non-profit groups.

So Arizona Forward, an offshoot of a 42-year-old nonprofit organization dedicated to general sustainability issues within the Metro Phoenix area, got to work. The group's objectives were to research how state residents view their parks and open spaces and then educate citizens about the myriad ways parks enrich their economy and improve their lives.

First, they commissioned a survey of over 400 Arizonans about their beliefs and attitudes about the state's parks, open spaces, and wilderness lands. The survey yielded the following results:

- 92 percent believe that parks and open spaces are essential to the state's tourism economy.
- 86 percent visit parks at least once or twice a year, and 41 percent visit weekly or monthly.
- 74 percent say parks and open spaces are important to them personally, and 71 percent say parks are important to the overall economy.

One of the most interesting findings, though, had to do with residents' knowledge of where the money for their parks comes from: Only about 18 percent of those surveyed said they fully understood how state and local parks are funded, even though the much-publicized budget cuts and park closures had only recently occurred.

The survey results prompted Arizona Forward to publish on their website a leaflet entitled "Why Parks and Open Space Matter: The Economics of Arizona's Natural Assets." The publication tackles the misconception that parks are purely a cost—and it supplies ample research showing the returns on investment that Arizona's parks have brought the state. A 2007 study by Northern Arizona University, for example, calculated that visitors to state parks produced more than \$266 million in economic benefits and supported 3,347 jobs. Diane Brossart, director of Arizona Forward, says the goal of educating the state's residents (rather than advocating for particular methods of funding) is resonating with the public—and that her organization has been flooded with positive emails from all over the state.

The way Arizona Forward's organizers see it, Arizonans already believe instinctively that parks are essential—and, if supplied with hard facts, will insist on keeping parks funded. ☀