

TOWN OF CAREFREE
CAREFREE VILLAGE CENTER MASTER PLAN

**PROMOTION & ORGANIZATION
ASSESSMENT REPORT**



SUBMITTED BY:



December 12, 2014

I. Introduction

Ms. Lani Lott, President of L.L. Consulting, on behalf of Michael Baker Company, has prepared the following assessment of Carefree's Village Center promotions and organizational structure. The report includes Ms. Lott's findings and general observations covering the marketing, events and the organizational structure of the Village Center in Carefree, AZ. The assessment is based on Ms. Lott's visits to the Village Center, reviewing past documents and survey results, interviews with the various festival coordinators as well as non-profit organization leadership, one-on-one interviews with a cross-section of the Center's businesses, in-depth discussion with Mr. Owens from Owens Harkey, participation in the Café Bistro Community Workshop and Ms. Lott's 22 years in the field of commercial district revitalization.

MARKETING

Findings/Observations

The various marketing publications and websites that promote the community of Carefree use a variety of adjectives or phrases to describe the Town's various events, attractions and venues. There is not a unified or common "tagline" or phrase currently utilized to support a consistent "brand" for Carefree. On the other hand, the Town's website (www.carefree.org) and marketing collateral as well as the Town's companion visitor website (www.VisitCarefree.com) interchangeably use three very short taglines- "*The Best Small Town in Arizona*", "*Life As It Should Be*" and "*Carefree - Experience the Difference!*" In addition, many individuals felt that the image or reference to Carefree's Sundial had run its course and perhaps it was time for a new, more updated "brand" or image.

Recently there has been discussion among Town officials, key stakeholders and residents if the Town Center should start to be referred to as the *Village Center*. No decision has been made as of yet.

The Town has contracted for the last few years with the Phoenix based advertising agency, Owens Harkey Advertising to implement a marketing and public relations campaign on behalf of the entire Town of Carefree. Through an interview with Mr. Owens, it appears that the firm has primarily focused on (1) developing relationships with the local businesses and implementing a number of promotional tactics (direct mail, coupon books, videos) to help market the businesses and encourage consumers to come visit them, (2) launching and maintaining a visitor website (www.VisitCarefree.com) as well as robust Facebook presence (www.facebook.com/TownOfCarefree) growing the fan base to over 1,300 and (3) generating coverage with the regional media outlets covering "newsworthy" events and activities. Mr. Owens mentioned that they have also hosted visits with several resort/hotel concierges showcasing Carefree's events and attractions. During the interview, Mr. Owens indicated that the new trend in promoting a destination like Carefree is not to use a specific image or "brand" but rather look at how to package the various assets or destination drivers as the draw. Mr. Owens indicated that a new campaign will be rolled out in 2015 targeted at reaching Valley residents and promoting the easy



drive up to Carefree to attend one of the area’s events, stroll through the Desert Gardens and/or just come and spend the day and enjoy the “Carefree” lifestyle.

There are an array of websites that contain current, appealing and adequate information about Carefree, its events and festivals and the various points of interest. Most of the websites have updated information regarding activities in the coming months and appear to cross-link with each other creating a very consumer friendly approach when searching what may be going on in Carefree. Some of the websites are more professional in appearance while others are less appealing, engaging and harder to navigate. Most of the sites link to social media tools (such as Facebook, Twitter, Yelp, Pinterest, Urbanspoon, etc.) as well as several sites are utilizing e-marketing. A large portion of the Village Center businesses maintain professional websites with information about products, location and hours posted, have links to social media tools, testimonials and photo galleries. A few businesses have e-commerce sites and are currently selling products through their websites.

Below are observations regarding the three websites, which in the opinion of the consultant are the primary sites that are used to promote and market Carefree’s events, businesses and attractions. The three websites include the Town of Carefree’s, VisitCarefree.com and the Carefree/Cave Creek Chamber of Commerce’s site.

Town of Carefree Website - www.carefree.org

Like most Town or City websites, the Town of Carefree’s site has a lot going on – providing information for visitors, residents and business as well as official Town data and updates. The overall site is a bit difficult to navigate and it appears there are several different types of fonts being used. However the section geared at visitors is packed with useful information, and links including Village Center events, the Desert Gardens, a business directory, map of restaurants and a photo album. There are also links to Visit Carefree, two of the area’s lodging facilities and the Carefree Cave Creek Chamber.



Individuals can also sign up for both the Carefree Official Information & Notification System (COINS) e-mail as well as the Town Newsletter under the Visitor Section. Oddly, the link on the main page to Visit Carefree takes viewers to an alternative website where you are then required to find and select a link to the Visit Carefree site.

Visit Carefree Website – www.VisitCarefree.com.

This website is managed by Owens Harkely Advertising under the Town’s contract and appears to solely be designed to reach visitors and tourists. The site is not driven by membership nor is it cluttered with advertising. The site lists the Carefree events and attractions as well as Carefree businesses that truly cater to visitors’ interest (such as dining, shopping and lodging). It does have a section for “service businesses” which is unusual for a visitor geared type of website. It is a very attractive and engaging website with beautiful pictures, rich content and videos to generate additional interest. The blogs do seem to be random and not very consistent but this could be due to the long seasonality of the area with not much to “blog” about in the summer.



Carefree/Cave Creek Chamber of Commerce website – www.carefreecavecreek.org

The Chamber's website is very typical of a Chamber site – promoting both community as well as its membership. The site is very attractive and does a great job listing all of its members as well as providing information on upcoming community events. The site is attractive and easy to navigate. Although the Chamber represents more communities than just Carefree, it appears to promote all of the specific areas fairly and does a great job promoting Carefree's events as well as Carefree businesses and organizations that are members of the Chamber.



Like the array of websites, there also appears to be a variety of printed marketing collateral currently being distributed to promote Carefree which includes maps, community and visitor guides, rack cards, publications and flyers. The various collateral appears to be created, produced (and probably funded) by various agencies, non-profits and for profit organizations with NO one agency responsible for all collateral about the Town/Village Center activities and amenities. The majority of the collateral is high quality, professionally designed and printed. Each piece has adequate contact information about the event or point of interest and includes either a link to an appropriate website and/or phone numbers. Many of the businesses located in the Town/Village Center also advertise in the various publications providing additional exposure for themselves.

Both the Town of Carefree and the Carefree/Cave Creek Chamber of Commerce “house” a Visitor Center. The Town's Visitor Center is located in Town Hall, is open when Town Hall is open (Monday – Friday – 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.), has limited marketing collateral and visitors are greeted by the front desk personnel. The Chamber's Visitor Center is located within the Chamber's office on Easy Street and has signage out in the public walkway that reads “Carefree – Cave Creek Chamber of Commerce INFORMATION CENTER. The Chamber's Center is open weekdays – Monday – Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and is set up more like a traditional Visitor Center with an array of marketing collateral, dedicated docents that welcome each visitor and answer questions and some Carefree/Cave Creek merchandise. Both Centers do have some type of self-service kiosk located outside of their physical locations with collateral available for taking when the Centers are closed.



In addition to the various websites, social media, marketing collateral and physical Visitor Centers, there are also (1) professionally prepared streetlight banners strategically placed throughout the Village Center promoting the various events and amenities, (2) many of the businesses have event posters or rack cards displayed in their windows or available at their check out stations, and (3) the Town maintains a common kiosk near the Sanderson Lincoln Pavilion, which has posters and other related event flyers posted.



EVENTS

Findings/Observations

By far, Carefree's strongest asset appears to be the robust Calendar of Events that are hosted between October and April which draw residents, regional visitors and even out of state tourists to the area. A number of the events are held right in the Village Center, the Desert Gardens and/or at the stunning Sanderson Lincoln Pavilion. Residents have a strong appreciation for the events and enjoy attending them on a regular basis. Most businesses understand their importance in generating additional consumer markets for their operations and for the most part try to participate in the event or at least be open when it is happening. The Town currently does not produce any of the events but rather relies on professional promoters or nonprofit organizations to coordinate and implement them. However the Town is an active partner with the events that are held in the Village Center providing access to the public restrooms, use of the new sound system at the Pavilion and helping promote and market the activities on the Town's website, Facebook page and VisitCarefree.com.



Several new events are being added to the 2014/2015 calendar including Kiwanis Evening Concert series (fee based) and FREE Sunday Afternoon Concert Series (hosted by the Town). Residents indicated that they are very excited to see the Sunday concerts return. Residents and businesses alike suggested that there be more variety in events and that the art festival formats are getting tired and too saturated. Many also felt that there was opportunity to leverage the Desert Gardens more, the quality of any events should be maintained and there needs to be more consistency in overall guidelines, layout and scheduling of the events.

The annual Calendar of Events does appear to have a gap in scheduling between April and October with nothing really going on except a very thin Farmers' Market, a once a month Flea Market hosted by the Kiwanis and the annual July 3-4 Fireworks. Knowing that this is a result of the seasonality of the desert, creative ideas still need to be considered and tried as a way to draw people up to Carefree during the hot (and lean) summer months.

There was some concern expressed of growing competition of events at Stagecoach Village and/or in Cave Creek. It does appear that there are also a number of events held at both these locations during the high season but most of them are held at a different time than the Carefree events with really only one event (Cave Creek Wild West Days) scheduled at the same time as a Carefree event. Instead of looking at these events as competition, in the consultant's opinion, that the synergy generated from the continuous stream of events being held in the region (Cave Creek, Stagecoach Village and/or Carefree) should be viewed as a positive for the Carefree businesses by providing potential customers to draw upon. If individuals have made it up to either a Cave Creek or Stagecoach Village event then they are more likely to stay and explore the area and hopefully visit neighboring towns and attractions.



Events Organized by For Profit Promoters:

The three annual **Thunderbird Fine Arts & Wine Festivals** are considered by most as Carefree's "Signature Events" drawing visitors regionally as well as from out of the State. The Thunderbird Festivals do close the streets and appear to be the only Carefree festival that charges an admission (Carefree residents get in free while visitors are charged \$3). Some businesses expressed frustration with the street closures and the impact it has on their customer's parking as well as the tents blocking access to their businesses. However when attending the actual event, it appeared that the promoter worked very hard to lay out the artist space to allow enough flow to those businesses that were open as well as there was more than ample parking available for both event attendees as well as customers coming to Carefree to visit a particular business. There were very few food vendors and the quality was a bit lacking in choices. However, it appeared that the restaurants were full. Entertainment was truly just a backdrop for the event and the fine art booths were the main attraction. In regards to the admission fee, the Town receives a percentage of the gate as well as the Chamber for coordinating the volunteers. The promoters indicated that they draw about 15,000 - 20,000 in attendance and have a very robust and aggressive marketing campaign that reaches locals, regional and even international markets.

The four events organized by Magic Bird Festivals which include **Carefree Fine Art of the Southwest Festival, Carefree Indian Market and Cultural Festival, Carefree Festival of Chocolate and Fine Art and Carefree Days** - are all fairly new and are building their reputation within the marketplace. All four events are FREE to the public and no streets are closed - vendors are actually placed strategically within the Desert Gardens. The vendors in these four events are not juried and some individuals who attended the community workshop felt that the overall quality of the "artists" was not up to par compared to the Thunderbird events. The promoter indicated that each festival draws about 10,000 - 15,000 in attendance and the events are marketed locally and throughout the Valley.

Events Organized by Non Profit Organizations:

The Sonoran Arts League is a non-profit that represents over 450 artists. The League just moved to a larger location in Cave Creek which is off Tom Darlington Drive and somewhat hard to find. However, the League Executive Director indicated that the new location allows the organization to host more workshops as well as maintain a small gallery. The League currently hosts several events - **Empty Bowls** held in October at the Sanderson Lincoln Pavilion, **Hidden in the Hills Artists Studio Tour** in November, and the **Sonoran Arts League Festival of Fine Arts** held in March and is coordinated in partnership with Vermillion Promotions. The Arts League considers **the Hidden in the Hills Open Studio Tour** its signature event. The tour is held over two consecutive weekends in November and is considered the Valley's largest open studio tour. The Open Studio Tour is a driving tour and does not have any staged activities held during the weekends directly in the Town Village. **The Festival of Fine Arts** is held in the Village Center and is a closed street event with over 150-juried vendors. It is a FREE event and in 2015 the festival organizers will be adding a Beer and Wine Garden as well as additional entertainment. Magic Bird Festivals estimated that over the three days, it draws about 20,000 attendees. The festival depends on a more grass roots marketing campaign that includes a message board, some print and radio, social media and mailing of postcards to a database of over 10,000 names.



The Carefree Farmers Market is coordinated by Dee Logan and was started in 2002. It is a small, true farming and food market (NO crafts) and usually has about 26 vendors. At peak season, the market can draw about 500 in attendance. It attracts individuals from within a 10-to 15 mile radius.

The Carefree Christmas Festival & Electric Light Parade is by far one of the most popular events from the local residents perspective and is sponsored by the Town of Carefree who expends significant resources and man hours to bring the community this holiday favorite. The Carefree Cave Creek Chamber assists the Town with organizing the light parade as well as reaches out to the community for donations and business sponsorships to offset the costs of the parade. The event draws about 20,000 in attendance. It is the only event that draws families and young children. The balance of community events held in Carefree includes **Whiskers and Wine** (a fundraiser for the Foothills Animal Rescue), **Salute to Veterans** (held on Veterans Day in the Desert Gardens), **Garden Seminars** and **the Kiwanis Pancake Breakfast** (fundraiser for Kiwanis Youth Programs).

The Desert Foothills Theater (DFT) and Desert Foothills Youth Theater (DFYT) is celebrating its 40th year presenting award-winning theater in the far north valley. Both DFT and DFYT are programs of the Foothills Community Foundation. The theater has seven productions per year with four being adult and three youth oriented. Although all the productions are currently being held at the Cactus Shadows Fine Arts Center (which consists of a 400 seat theater and a 150 black box theatre) they **have been hosting cabaret shows in partnership with Venus Café and have sold out all three shows.** The Theatre Advisory Board has been exploring options of building and/or relocating into new space that would open up new opportunities for the Theatre as well as the ability to expand its season. All actors are volunteers. There are also about 100 working artists including designers, musicians, and teachers. They currently host a summer youth camp program and do some educational series. They draw from the local area as well as throughout the Valley and attract about 7,000 attendees throughout the yearly season.

Non Event Promotions

There appears to be no formally organized Town/Village Center business promotions, such as Customer Appreciation Month, Employee Discount Card/Days, Restaurant Week, etc. It appears that some of the businesses do organize small “in business” promotions within their own establishment such as English Tea Room’s “tea tasting” event or special “meet the artist” promotions at galleries. The Chamber of Commerce provides networking breakfasts and educational luncheons as well as various advertising opportunities for members such as a listing on the Chamber’s website and in the Community Guide, business cards at the Information Center and an option to include business information in their monthly e-newsletter or special e-blasts.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Findings/Observations

As with most communities, there is no one entity that is solely responsible for all aspects of promoting, managing and maintaining their traditional downtown or commercial core --- municipalities typically are responsible for maintaining and enhancing the public spaces and infrastructure. Chambers of commerce focus on supporting their members interests while



downtown associations or merchant groups typically explore how to promote and market the downtown district and its businesses. Property owners primarily are concerned with keeping tenants while the businesses within a community are focused on surviving and growing their business venture. The Town of Carefree is no different. It appears that there are many passionate individuals and organizations that are all involved in working towards a common goal – maintaining a vibrant Village Center and creating a sense of place that provides rich experiences, choices in dining, shopping and recreating and contributing to a stellar, “Carefree” quality of life.

Town Hall takes a much more active role in the promotion and marketing of the community than other towns typically do. The Town currently maintains and oversees the management of the Desert Gardens and the Sanderson Lincoln Pavilion, contracts directly with several festival promoters as well as an advertising agency, maintains a robust visitor presence on the Town’s website and has positioned Town Hall as a visitor center.

The Carefree/Cave Creek Chamber of Commerce on the other hand has shifted from being the organization perceived in the community as “that organization that does parades” to being more of a business and membership driven organization. However the Chamber does NOT lobby or endorse candidates. The four key strategies of the Chamber currently include (1) Recruit and retain membership through a program of business development and networking events, (2) Business advocacy, (3) Acting as a resource for the community and visitors and (4) Functioning as a marketing arm for the local events and festivals. The Chamber indicated they receive a lot of calls each week ranging from interest in starting a business to what’s happening that weekend in Town to location of the library. The Chamber assists with coordinating the Christmas Light Parade as well as overseeing the volunteers for the Thunderbird Fine Art Festivals.

Over the years, it was indicated that there have been many versions of a Carefree Business Association but currently there is not a formally formed organization. The Town does have several formal commissions and a steering committee was recently formed for the purpose of providing input and feedback on the Village Center Master Plan. The Town Council is currently functioning as the Economic Development Advisory Board for the entire Town.

One of the most important strategic goals to be taken is to ensure that a community can achieve its vision for the commercial core and help the business community reach its full potential. A paramount strategy is to establish a strong organizational structure that represents both the private and public sectors. The establishment of the Steering Committee for the purposes of the Village Center Master Plan is a great start at laying the foundation in establishing an inclusive, productive organizational structure that can help champion and carry forward the strategies that will be presented in the Master Plan. However it appears that there are still some attitudes among the community of not truly understanding the function or “mission” of key organizations and/or agencies. This type of attitude can result in a community being less effective with its revitalization efforts and can actually undermine the hard work and momentum it takes to sustain a thriving, vibrant commercial district in today’s competitive marketplace. The goal of an effective organizational framework is to involve as many components of the community as possible. It should not rely on just one entity, such as the Town or the Chamber or even a volunteer business group, to



single-handedly keep the commercial district “vitalized”. To create a Town or Village Center that is competitive in all aspects, it must have the dedicated resources (financial and people) that equal the level of programs and activities needed to reach its vision, a strong organizational structure with the capacity to engage the entire community in the process and eventually dedicated staff to focus on the Village Center.

There are many options for organizing the effort, but the approach must reflect the character and resources of the community. It must have the long-term capacity to support the performance that is required to properly manage the commercial core and engage all the various stakeholders and partners.

The Town has recently posted a job announcement for an Event/Public Relations Coordinator. This is a step in the right direction for creating a position that will be solely dedicated to helping coordinate the various promotions and events held in the Village Center and connecting with all the various stakeholder groups and individuals that use the Pavilion or Village Center for hosting their activities. As this new position comes on board, it will be important to revisit and if needed redefine the various other stakeholders and partner roles (such the Chamber, local business owners, property owners/landlords and professional promoters) to strengthen working relationships among everyone and begin the process of cultivating solutions and identifying funding mechanism to support the recommendations offered in the Village Center’s Master Plan.

It appears that there are a few electronic communication venues (the Town’s COINS notice and the Chamber’s e-newsletter and e-blasts) that are currently being used to communicate with the residents and business owners. In addition, there may be some face-to-face conversations between the Town, the Event promoters and the business owners, however many of the businesses that were interviewed indicated that communication between all entities could be greatly improved. There also appears to be limited communication (formal or informal) with the property owners and/or property management firms. With the number of different promoters and organizations that are involved with supporting the Village Center’s events or promotions, it is critical that a clear, consistent communication network is supported and that all parties are aware of all aspects of the events including days and times, guidelines, street closures, marketing opportunities and what is expected of each partner. One of the most important functions that the new staff position can fulfill is “walking the Center” and meeting one on one with the businesses on a regular basis.

