

Gaggle - John Giles Interview Mixdown 1.wav

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:00:00] John Giles is the 40th mayor of the city of Mesa. He first won the mayor's seat in 2014 and then again in 2016 and 2020. Next year. In 2024, he'll finish his tenure in the Valley's largest suburb. Under his leadership, Mesa has seen a burst of growth, including thousands of jobs from notable businesses like Apple, Amazon, Google and Meta. More than \$8 billion in new capital investment. Despite being a hub for a large Latter-Day Saints community, Mayor Giles signed a nondiscrimination ordinance in 2021. ASU opened its Media Immersion and Experience Center in Mesa, and the defunct Fiesta Mall is finally coming down to be replaced with mixed use construction.

Ron Hansen [00:00:52] Welcome to the Gaggle, a politics podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. Each week we dissect our state's political news to help you understand what your lawmakers and public leaders are up to. I'm Ron Hansen. I cover national politics for The Republic.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:01:09] And I'm Mary Jo Pitzl. I cover the state legislature and state policy.

Ron Hansen [00:01:14] Joining us in our studio is Mesa Mayor John Giles. Mayor, thanks for stopping by.

Mayor John Giles [00:01:18] Thank you. It's an honor to be here.

Ron Hansen [00:01:20] Also joining us today is our Mesa reporter, Maritza Dominguez. Great to have you back, Maritza.

Maritza Dominguez [00:01:25] Glad to be here.

Ron Hansen [00:01:27] Okay. So Mesa is one of the more dynamic cities in a state that is one of the fastest growing in the country. A lot has happened since you've been mayor in Mesa. It's moved from about 400,000 to about 500,000 population. We've seen a number of different fronts open up on the business side as well. As you look at your tenure as mayor. How do you view the changes in the time since you've been in that position?

Mayor John Giles [00:01:57] Well, Ron, my when I was a kid growing up and I would come home from school and brag to my mom about something good that had happened during the day, she always said, you know, John, that's great. But it always sounds better when someone else says it. And so thank you for noticing that Mesa is doing well. We're proud of our humility. And so we rely on other people to point out that we're doing well. And you're right, we've made some significant progress over the last decade. You know, we're an overnight success has been building for decades and decades. And so all of the success that you're seeing in Mesa, really the foundation was laid years and years ago. A lot of the economic successes out in the Gateway Airport area. I happen to have been on our city council back in the 1990s, a couple of years after the Air Force handed the keys to that Air Force base to the city. And we really felt like the dog that had caught a car, you know, what the heck are we supposed to do with thousands of acres of developable property that surrounds three, 10,000 foot runways? That's a good thing. But it's in the middle of nowhere. It's surrounded by rattlesnakes and cactus. And we're going to have to spend many, many millions of dollars to access that potential. The same is true for our downtown as a result of freeways and shopping malls and just the economy, a once very, very vibrant economic capital of Arizona was shut down. And so we started investing in art

centers and light rail and ASU campuses and Benedictine University and all of the things, you know, all of the puzzle pieces were there. When I arrived nine years ago. And so I was just kind of been my privilege to be there, to see it mature and become noticeably better.

Ron Hansen [00:03:41] Do you have a sense now as to what may be the most important development in all of this? 20 years from now, when people are talking about how much Mesa will have changed by that time, we'll look back and say, wow, that was really kind of the big thing. You cited the airport back in the day. What is going to be that thing 20 years from now?

Mayor John Giles [00:04:00] It might still be the airport and. Well, it's going to be it. I'll take a step back. It's going to be investment in infrastructure because that's the thing that we have in common with the progress you've seen out at Gateway. Again, the reason Gateway has succeeded is because we took freeways and university campuses and masterplan communities and investment in air traffic control towers and all of those things is what laid the foundation for that success. If it's going to continue to succeed, it's going to be because of additional investment in infrastructure. And the same is true downtown. You know, we invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the light rail system and in other capital improvements. So I think that's the lesson. That's not a secret. I remember coming to downtown Phoenix when I was a teenager and being afraid. We wanted to have our high school prom down here, but, you know, it was too dangerous. And now parking my car to walk into this building today, it's a thriving, amazing location. And so I have always said that we are very openly stealing the success model that we've seen in downtown Phoenix with the combination of the light rail and inviting the issue to be a partner. There's nothing unique about our pathway to success.

Maritza Dominguez [00:05:14] We've talked about ways that the city's changed, but what's been constant about Mesa.

Mayor John Giles [00:05:20] You know, a week ago we were cutting the ribbon at the old Mesa Post office that has now become a downtown venue. And it's an amazing building that was built coming out of the Depression, very historic. And Councilmember Duff, who lives in the area, was commenting on how it's been a priority of ours to to invest and to invite growth, but to try to maintain the character of our downtown. It's unique. You know, it's not Mill Avenue. It's not Central Avenue. It's not Flagstaff. It's it's Mesa. And there's kind of a. Family feel. But it's a very quirky family. It's a diverse family. It's a family with weird uncles that show up for Thanksgiving. But nonetheless, it's unique. It's very character filled. And somehow, so far, we've been able to to manage to continue that. I hope we're able to continue to do that.

Maritza Dominguez [00:06:12] Something else that that's been constant for probably a lot of Mesa residents is your tenure as mayor. You're wrapping up next year, a decade long of mayoral service. What are some challenges that you expect to handoff to your successor?

Mayor John Giles [00:06:26] Yeah, I'm envious. And I but I also am glad to get out, you know, with without any major damage. I'm grateful for term limits because I would have you would have had to drag me out of office if there hadn't been term limits. So I'm excited for who follows me. The pieces are all there. Back ten years ago when I started. Mesa used to be described as having potential. Right. Oh, look, you've got all the tools, You've got all the things you need to have a successful downtown. You've got all the things you need to attract major companies. And I think there was a college football coach once who said the potential is the saddest word in the English language because it implies that

you're underperforming. You know, well, maybe someday, you know, there's no good reason why you're not succeeding. And so I think we've made it over that hump that's in our rearview mirror now. And no one talks about potential anymore in the conversation about Mesa. So that's good for the folks that will continue to lead Mesa. Our brand is now a quality brand. You don't get Apple and Google and Matta and Boeing and Virgin Galactic and Gulfstream. And I could go on and on. You know, if you're not one of the best places in the world to locate and grow a business, we've got that going for us now. So the challenges will continue. There'll be growth. People will continue to move here. We're going to continue, as I said earlier, to need to really support that growth with infrastructure or the quality of life is not going to be there. We're going to lose. The character that I talked about earlier will just be another set of street lights in the Greater Phoenix. That's not what we want. We want to figure out how to continue to be Mesa. But I'm very optimistic. I continue to say Mesa's best days are ahead of it. That's sometimes people like me who grew up in Mesa cringe when I say that, but I don't at all. I think it's very exciting. I think we've like I say, we're building on top of the successes that we've made earlier and we'll continue to get better.

Maritza Dominguez [00:08:23] You've talked about infrastructure a couple of times here, and you were heavily involved in the push to get Proposition 400, a continuation of a regional sales tax for transportation through the legislature. And it does look like it's headed to the ballot next year. Light rail was one of the big points of contention. How is that going to work out? If voters approved a Prop 400 extension, what will that mean for light rail going forward in Mesa and for other transportation projects?

Mayor John Giles [00:08:54] What you've seen the city of Phoenix really embrace light rail. I mean, there's been some voter initiatives there. And so the continuation and expanse of light rail in Phoenix is on a great trajectory. In Mesa, we don't have additional funding above and beyond the regional sales tax. And so the reason we were fighting so hard over 400 is because that was a carefully crafted plan that took MAG years to prepare and it was a multimodal plan. And so if you're going to see light rail or transit continue to grow in Mesa, it's going to be that that was the vehicle that was going to happen by was through the extension of Prop 400. So to specifically answer your question, people ask or is the light rail going to continue to go east from Gilbert Road? Not probably in our lifetimes. That's not part of the plan. The plan now for continued transit expansion in Mesa, in addition to bus transit, would be to build on the success of the Tempe streetcar. Tempe streetcar now is coming down. Rio Salado. Rio Salado, you know, is just an amazing real estate address right now. A lot of development there through Riverview up into Mesa to the the Cubs training facility. So we want to connect to the Tempe streetcar, take it down, Rio Salado, up to Dobson and then Dobson. If you've been to the Mesa Asian District recently, you know, that's phenomenal. And the growth there is very organic and it's very substantial. People are now wanting to live in the Asian district in Mesa to be near those hundred Asian themed restaurants and businesses that are along the Dobson Road corridor. So the light rail or the really the streetcar will continue up. Dobson to get to Southern at the intersection of Southern and Dobson you've got this state's largest community college, the state's largest hospital. Take a left, then you're at the mall, which is on the verge of being redeveloped into something very exciting. And then that'll wrap around and hook up to the light rail again. So that's a very exciting expand. And in continuation of the rail system in Mason, and that is baked into the 400 plan. And so in future decades, that's how it's going to expand.

Maritza Dominguez [00:11:00] Well, given that, will you be involved in the campaign for Prop 400? And if so, how?

Mayor John Giles [00:11:05] Yes, I'm one of the co-chairs of the campaign. So I'll be raising money and doing podcasts and doing whatever I can, you know, to raise awareness that how important this is. This is the way that Phoenix and Mesa have grown for the last several decades. We're not asking anybody to take any chances. We're just saying let's keep doing what we've done well for the last several decades. And we'll continue to be the envy of the rest of the United States when it comes to transportation infrastructure.

Maritza Dominguez [00:11:33] You talked about, first of all, at one point you called it the universe of the East Valley for shopping. Now, that is being reshaped. What is going to be so exciting about the future of what was once Fiesta Mall?

Mayor John Giles [00:11:48] Well, I'm not a real estate developer, but I know the three most important things are location, location, location. Right. And so that's continued. The intersection of Alma School and Southern continues to be one of the biggest volume intersections in the East Valley. It's literally you can throw a rock from there and hit Chandler and Gilbert and two freeways and the other assets that we talked about earlier. So it's a very strategic location. And the mall has now been demolished. So I think that will help with the marketing of the mall. There's been discussions about some very exciting developments going in there. All of those, I think, are still very possible. Residential will certainly be a part of it. It's going to be a mixed use of some variety. So that will be a very desirable place to live and work and play. And like I said, we're working to get the transit infrastructure out there. So when I was younger, that was the center of the universe. That's where we all of our economic activity was. And I think it's going to return to something along those lines in the foreseeable future.

Maritza Dominguez [00:12:49] And on another note, the city of Phoenix has recently finished clearing out the zone, which is the valley's largest homeless encampment where it was close to a lot of social services. Macy's also struggling with its unhoused population. And throughout the Covid pandemic, we've seen the numbers start to rise in 2020. To the county's Point-In-Time survey counted 451 people, and this year was 366. The council has just recently narrowly passed the proposal to turn a hotel into transitional housing. How will that work and is it enough to make a difference? And can you describe some of those tensions within the community over homelessness and how the city plans to address it?

Mayor John Giles [00:13:36] Yeah, Thanks for asking that question. When I was a brand new mayor, I used to go out of my way to very intentionally say to people, homelessness is an issue in Mesa, Arizona, because I felt like I needed to raise awareness about the issue. I don't feel like I need to say that anymore. Instead of saying homelessness is an issue, I acknowledge that homelessness is the issue in Mesa, Arizona. When I was growing up in Mesa, whenever we wanted to see into the future, we would travel to Southern California and we could tell what we were going to be wearing, what cars we're going to be driving, what music we were going to be listening to. You know, all of that was just they were like six months to a year or two ahead of us. Now, when I travel to Southern California, I see ubiquitous homelessness. And it's not just Southern California. It's any large city in the United States, along the East Coast, the West Coast. And you mentioned the point in time count. We were a little bit down this year compared to the year before. But the point in time is not a great way to measure homelessness. You know, it's a pretty random number that just happens. One very, very cold morning in December. Every other metric that we apply to measuring homelessness shows that we're seeing very strong increases throughout Maricopa County. So it's coming. It's and we need to run to the front of this problem as

hard as we can. For too long, Phoenix has downtown Phoenix particularly, it's kind of borne the brunt of providing services. So Mesa, in Tempe and in other cities are stepping up at Imag. Now for the first time, we have a regional homeless strategic plan. And all of the cities in Maricopa County are committed to making progress and doing something to help. The pandemic has actually been a godsend when it comes to homelessness because it's provided some one time federal funding that we're about to run out of. But we launched in Mesa, our Off the Streets program using federal funds, and that's been very successful. We've had a 75% success rate in terms of when people graduate from that that temporary housing program, they go into permanent housing. And so the fear has been, well, what my gosh, what are we going to do here in a year or so when we hit this funding cliff? And so you mentioned the purchase of the motel. That's again, 100% federal dollars, but it allow us to invest in an asset so that we're not trying to figure out from the general fund how we're going to pay for emergency shelter. That adds to the other inventory that we have at these value in shelter and other facilities for emergency beds. And we're going to continue to try to create more transitional housing. But again, it's you asked, is it going to have an impact? Yes, it is. But it's still not enough for every every person we take off the street. There's 2 or 3 more that are going on. All we can do is all we can do. But we need to at least be that we need to elevate this issue in Mesa and throughout the Valley. You know, NIMBYism is alive and well. A lot of people in our community and throughout the valley are saying, yeah, we should do something, but I don't want to have it in my neighborhood. I want to pretend it's not existing. I want to stick my head in the sand so we have some progress that we need to make in terms of just committing as families and communities that we're going to do all we can to help folks like that.

Ron Hansen [00:16:51] Mayor, you cited federal resources. I want to shift gears, if I can, more fully to federal issues. Walk through some political matters with you. You are a Republican. You've also notably backed Democrats in a few races in recent vintage. Among them, Katie Hobbs for governor. How are you sizing up 2024? Let's start with the presidential race. Former President Donald Trump is the frontrunner in the Republican Party that you are still a part of. Do you see yourself supporting President Trump on that? How about Joe Biden not being involved?

Mayor John Giles [00:17:26] Yeah, I think it's too early to issue endorsements or to say who to vote for or not. There's still some optimism in some corners of the Republican Party that there might be someone other than the former president at the top of the ticket. So I'm going to withhold judgment on on that for a while. It's been interesting to see that the panic among Democratic ranks about President Biden's electability given his age and unpopular situations at the border and others. So I'm going to withhold judgment for now. And in that and other races. But as you indicated, at some point, I expect I will make my opinions known and try to do my best to campaign for those that I think ought to win the elections.

Ron Hansen [00:18:15] Any first impressions on Ambassador Nikki Haley?

Mayor John Giles [00:18:18] Positive. I'm an old school Republican. I'm a John McCain Republican. When I was in law school, I interned in his office and enjoyed a good relationship with him. In the first few years, I was the mayor. So I take offense to people that want to denigrate his memory. She comes from that, from that wing of the party where I associate myself as well. So, yeah, I. I like what I hear.

Ron Hansen [00:18:43] Let's shift to the Senate race. We have the potential for a three way race, which is fairly novel and a number of different options here. Republican Cory

Lake, who you did not support in the governor's race last year, appears to be the front runner for the Republicans. Kirsten Cinema, the incumbent independent, has not indicated formally whether she intends to seek another term. And Democrat Ruben Gallego is the front runner for his party. Your thoughts on that race? And can you see yourself supporting anybody or ruling out supporting anybody?

Mayor John Giles [00:19:17] I do plan on supporting someone at the end because I think this as you indicated, this sets a fascinating potential. I still remember years ago when Evan Mechem became the governor of Arizona, and it was because of a three way race. So he had someone with a strong base. One extreme of the parties that ended up winning the election. So I think we're setting the stage for something like that to happen again. So, yeah, I won't be shy about expressing my opinions when the time comes, but it is a little early. You know, the question of the day is what is Senator Senator going to do and how is that going to impact the dynamics of the race? So she hasn't asked me my my my opinion on what she should do. I don't know. So I'm fascinated to see what happens. And, you know, maybe six months or a year or so from now, I think you'll see me fighting strong for somebody.

Ron Hansen [00:20:12] One last question on in this line of matters. The Arizona Republican Party has had a number of different challenges, not the least of which is its financial state at the moment. How do you gauge the health of the Republican Party at this time overall? Do you feel welcome there? Do you think the party is really sort of looking at how to expand and build on what it already has? How do you feel about the GOP?

Mayor John Giles [00:20:41] That's another great question. I think we need a big tent in the Republican Party. I've always thought it was foolish that the Republican Party didn't do more engagement with the Latin. You know, community. I think Latinos make amazing Republicans, and we've done everything we can to discourage that relationship and in other ways, driving the McCain part, you know, part of the party out, for very example, is just idiocy. And so I think the Republican Party is terminally ill unless it catches on to the fact they need to expand their ranks and they need to be more welcoming and more diverse. And so it could go either way. Right now, the trajectory is down unless it hits bottom and banks up. I think we don't have two strong parties right now. And I find that very sad. I've I've continued to be Republican and I will continue to be Republican. But I feel like I'm in the minority minority now. But I think it's important that the voices like mine continue to be in in the party and seek to take it in a different direction.

Maritza Dominguez [00:21:47] One of the things that you ran on early on as mayor, you talked about how Mesa had an image problem of being a highly conservative city. And then in 2021, Mesa State nondiscrimination ordinance, which means that no one can be discriminated against for a job, a place to live for goods or services. And it protects everyone regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation and so on. This was a big deal for the city, especially for a city that is highly conservative, has a large LDS population. One of the hallmarks of Mesa is the temple near its downtown. Why was passing this ordinance so important for you?

Mayor John Giles [00:22:25] Well, it was important, and I don't think Mesa suffers from a either the image or the reality that it's a conservative city. Like I say, I continue to cling to my Republican registration. I don't I'm not critical of conservatism. I do think there's a lot of issues, nondiscrimination ordinance included, that should be nonpartisan. Immigration ought to be nonpartisan. You know, these are very practical problems that need to be solved. But they're used as political fundraising tools by extreme groups and as wedges to

create controversy. So I'm very proud that Mesa stepped up in issues like the nondiscrimination ordinance and adopted a climate action plan and pursuing higher education. You know, there's a lot of things that people want to say are, oh, that that's a progressive agenda that you're pursuing. No, it's not. These are nonpartisan, good things that we need to elevate out of Partizan fundraising targets and treat them like problems to be solved. And so. I don't I don't see the progress that we made or my position in advocating for those things as being contrary to embracing conservative values.

Maritza Dominguez [00:23:43] You've got another year left in office, and you've mentioned that you will be co-chairing the drive to pass the transportation tax extension. But after all that's done, what's next for you?

Mayor John Giles [00:23:55] Oh, that's you know, I don't know is the answer. I really enjoyed the privilege of being mayor. I go to bed every night with a big smile on my face and just enjoy the working on and local issues. So I will hope to find a way to do that. I don't aspire to run for other office. I think this was my sweet spot. You know, when I when I decided to do this, it was I was compelled to try to help my hometown, not to enter politics. So I'll try to find ways to continue to be impactful in the same issues that I've been working on for the last 9 or 9, ten years. But I welcome the opportunity to not be an elected official anymore.

Maritza Dominguez [00:24:36] So I say maybe a long vacation might be in order.

Mayor John Giles [00:24:38] My wife has mentioned the importance of a long vacation being part of the equation. Yeah.

Ron Hansen [00:24:43] Well, Mayor, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us. We appreciate it. If people want to keep up with your thoughts in agenda online or on social media, where can they find you?

Mayor John Giles [00:24:54] I'm way easy to find @MayorGiles is on all of the social media channels. And also if you're a podcast fan, we started a podcast called It's Always Cool in Mesa a few years ago. That kind of just tells the stories of Mesa that are a little bit overlooked. Then that's on on all the platforms as well.

Ron Hansen [00:25:13] Well, we are fans of podcasts here at the gaggle, so thank you for touting that. And please listeners, do yourself a favor and tune in. Mayor Giles, thanks so much.

Mayor John Giles [00:25:22] My pleasure. Thanks for the invitation.

Ron Hansen [00:25:24] Marissa, thank you as well for being with us. If people want to follow your work online, where can they find you on social media?

Maritza Dominguez [00:25:32] People can follow me on X @MaritzaCDom.

Ron Hansen [00:25:40] That is it for this week, Gaggle listeners. Do you have questions about today's episode or topics you'd like us to cover for future episodes? Send us a message at (602) 444-0804. Or a voice memo to thegaggle@arizonarepublic.com.

Maritza Dominguez [00:26:03] This episode was edited and produced by Kaely Monahan. Script writing and research by myself, Ron Hansen and Maritza Dominguez. With

additional help by Kaely. News Direction from Kathy Tulumello. And our music comes from Universal Production Music.

Ron Hansen [00:26:21] Never miss an episode of The Gaggle by subscribing to us wherever you listen. If you learn something new today, be sure to share this episode with a friend. You can also leave us a review and rate us five stars. You can follow The gaggle on social media @azcpodcasts. I'm @RonaldJHansen

Maritza Dominguez [00:26:46] And I'm @MaryJPitzl. The Gaggle is an Arizona Republic, an azcentral.com production. Thanks again for listening and we'll be talking to you next week.