COBB CHAMBER

Phoenix
2026 Strategic Visit



Trip Recap

The 2026 Strategic Visit to Phoenix immersed business and community leaders in one of the nation's fastest-growing economic centers and a recognized leader in innovation, regional collaboration, and strategic growth. Throughout the trip, participants engaged with industry executives, government officials, and community partners to explore best practices in talent attraction, manufacturing, healthcare, sustainability, and economic development. Attendees returned with actionable ideas to support Cobb County's continued prosperity and foster stronger cross-sector collaboration.

Welcome to Phoenix: Mayor Kate Gallego

Mayor Kate Gallego opened the Strategic Visit by sharing how Phoenix has intentionally transformed its economy following the 2008 financial crisis through strategic investments and collaboration among government, business, universities, and community partners. She highlighted the city's focus on economic diversification, particularly in semiconductors and healthcare, including the recruitment of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) and its $265 billion investment, as well as the expansion of medical education, research, and innovation. Gallego emphasized the importance of workforce development, international partnerships, and voter-supported infrastructure investments in sustaining rapid growth. She also discussed the challenges of balancing economic development with community needs, particularly around data centers, housing, and infrastructure, while underscoring the importance of regional collaboration, long-term planning, and ensuring that growth benefits residents.



Greater Phoenix: The Power of Regional Partnership

Todd Sanders of the Greater Phoenix Chamber, Christine Mackay of the Greater Phoenix Economic Council, and Ryan Touhill of the City of Phoenix discussed the partnerships and strategies behind the region's economic development success. They highlighted how their organizations work together through clearly defined roles, coordinated business recruitment, and a regional-first approach that balances local interests with shared economic priorities. They discussed Phoenix's competitive advantages, including its welcoming culture, employer-driven workforce programs, streamlined development processes, and creative approaches to economic development incentives. They also shared how the region is preparing for its next phase of growth through emerging industries such as AI, quantum computing, and robotics, while addressing challenges related to housing affordability, energy capacity, and infrastructure. A central takeaway was the value of strong public-private partnerships, clear organizational responsibilities, and a unified regional approach to attracting investment and supporting long-term economic competitiveness.



Planning for Growth: Infrastructure, Mobility & Public Safety



Jesse Gutierrez of the Maricopa County Department of Transportation, John Bullen of the Maricopa Association of Governments, and Ed DeCastro of the Phoenix Police Department shared how Greater Phoenix is staying ahead of growth through regional planning, infrastructure investments, and public safety innovation. A key focus was the passage of Proposition 479, a 20-year transportation funding initiative built through four years of community engagement, technical planning, and regional consensus. The panel emphasized the importance of planning infrastructure before development arrives, accounting for long-term maintenance costs, and building strong partnerships across jurisdictions. They also shared how Phoenix Police is using technology, including drones, AI, and real-time crime centers, to improve efficiency, along with a services-first approach to addressing homelessness. The discussion reinforced that successful regional planning requires patience, collaboration, and a willingness to adapt as communities grow.

Southwest Mission Acceleration Center

Angela Aspito of the Southwest Mission Acceleration Center (SWMAC) and Darian Harris of Fuse Ventures shared how Arizona is connecting entrepreneurs, defense contractors, investors, and the Department of War to accelerate innovation and bring emerging technologies to market. Through SWMAC and the DIU OnRamp Hub, they highlighted efforts to dramatically shorten government contracting and technology testing timelines, citing reductions from 36 to 11 months for contracting and 18 months to just 72 days for field experimentation planning. The conversation emphasized the importance of connecting small businesses with major defense contractors, providing access to specialized testing facilities, and helping entrepreneurs secure the contracts and capital needed to grow. They also identified opportunities for regions like Cobb County to leverage existing military assets, strengthen defense industry partnerships, and attract emerging technology companies by addressing gaps in the defense supply chain.



Phoenix Bioscience Core | ASU + University of Arizona Projects

Mike Gonzalez of McCarthy Building Companies, Claudia Whitehead of the City of Phoenix, and Tamara Deuser of Arizona State University introduced the Phoenix Bioscience Core, a 30-acre innovation district bringing together universities, medical schools, research institutions, and private industry. What began as a redevelopment opportunity has grown into a major hub for healthcare education, research, and economic development, supported by strategic public investments, shared facilities, and long-term partnerships. The group learned how Phoenix has used city-owned land and direct university investments to attract institutions and align research with community health priorities, including firefighter cancer prevention and women's health. The visit also included behind-the-scenes construction tours of the University of Arizona Medical Innovations Building and ASU Health Headquarters, offering a firsthand look at how these partnerships are shaping the district's continued growth.





Town & Gown: Where Campus Meets Community



Lori Foster of the Downtown Tempe Authority, Robin Arredondo-Savage of the Tempe Chamber, Michael Martin of the Tempe Tourism Office, Tim Gomez of Arizona State University, and Joshua Rutherford of the City of Tempe shared how their organizations work together to strengthen the relationship between the university and the surrounding community. The conversation highlighted the value of intentional, ongoing communication, including a dedicated liaison position jointly funded by ASU and the city, and the role of business organizations in connecting local employers with university resources. Panelists also discussed Downtown Tempe's evolution beyond a traditional college town, with a growing mix of businesses, residents, hotels, and events that appeal to a broader audience. From tourism promotion to economic development and community programming, the discussion offered practical examples of how universities and their surrounding communities can work together to support growth while navigating challenges related to housing, transportation, and changing community needs.

The ASU Model: Innovation, Partnership & Growth

Neil Calfee and Linda Ricchiuti of Arizona State University shared how ASU has made economic development and entrepreneurship central to its mission, using university resources, land, and industry partnerships to attract investment and support business growth. ASU plays an active role in business recruitment and workforce development, creating pathways from high school and technical training to advanced degrees that respond directly to employer needs. The conversation also explored ASU's network of innovation zones and its approach to making entrepreneurship more accessible, including an incubator that grew from 30 to 1,000 participants after removing application requirements. Through shared mentorship resources, city-funded incubators, and programs that help international companies establish a U.S. presence, ASU has developed a model for supporting startups and connecting entrepreneurs with the resources they need to grow.

The SkySong Story: From Mall to Innovation Hub

Neil Calfee of ASU and Kevin Burke of the City of Scottsdale shared the 20-year story of SkySong, a 42-acre innovation center developed on the site of a former shopping mall. The transformation was made possible through a public-private partnership in which Scottsdale acquired the land and invested in infrastructure, while ASU served as a key anchor tenant, helping attract businesses and secure private investment. The discussion explored the importance of property ownership, community buy-in, and creating a distinctive identity for the development. Panelists also emphasized the value of phased development and flexibility as market conditions change, noting that the project continues to evolve more than two decades later. SkySong offered a compelling example of how a shared vision, strategic public investment, and a committed institutional partner can transform an underutilized property into a catalyst for broader redevelopment.



The Art of Placemaking: Scottsdale's Creative Identity



Kati Ballares of Scottsdale Public Art, Michelle Myers of Experience Scottsdale, and Kevin Burke of the City of Scottsdale shared how the city has made public art and cultural experiences central to its identity, tourism strategy, and economic development efforts. Scottsdale's longstanding commitment to dedicating 1% of capital project budgets to public art, along with incentives encouraging private developers to incorporate art, has helped create a distinctive sense of place throughout the community. The panel highlighted Canal Convergence, an annual public art event that began as a small initiative during the recession and now attracts more than 200,000 visitors each year. They also discussed how Scottsdale reinvests tourism revenue into marketing, events, and cultural infrastructure, while maintaining a dedicated approach to art selection and long-term maintenance. A key takeaway was that investing in authentic arts and cultural experiences for residents also strengthens a community's identity and appeal as a visitor destination.

Key Trip Learnings & Takeaways

- **Tell Cobb's story with intention.** Phoenix's consistent messaging across government, business, and universities reinforced the value of a shared vision and strong community identity.
- **Plan ahead and build consensus.** Phoenix's four-year Proposition 479 process demonstrated the importance of regional collaboration, early community engagement, and dedicated, long-term infrastructure funding.
- **Approach redevelopment strategically.** SkySong and the Phoenix Bioscience Core demonstrated how phased development, institutional anchors, and targeted public investment can transform underutilized properties.
- **Build on early workforce development efforts.** Continue engaging students earlier, aligning training with employer needs, and considering workforce commitments in development agreements.
- **Invest in Cobb's innovation ecosystem.** Expand partnerships with Kennesaw State University and Georgia Tech, mentorship resources, and business incubation while leveraging Cobb's military assets and opportunities in emerging industries.
- **Prioritize tourism, arts, and creative placemaking.** Scottsdale demonstrated how investments in destination marketing, arts, and culture can generate significant economic returns while strengthening community identity.
- **Strengthen collaboration across political and jurisdictional lines.** Arizona's experience navigating divided government reinforced the value of shared priorities and strong relationships, an existing strength in Cobb.
- **Build on Cobb and Georgia's competitive advantages.** Georgia's investment in higher education and technical training, combined with Cobb's collaborative leadership and infrastructure, provides a strong foundation for future growth.
- **Turn relationships into action.** Leverage connections made during the trip to identify shared priorities, strengthen partnerships, and advance new initiatives that benefit Cobb County.





Save the Date for the 2027 Strategic Visit to Nashville, TN!



We are thrilled to announce that the Cobb Chamber's 2027 Strategic Visit will take us to Nashville, Tennessee!

Known around the world for music and entertainment, Nashville is also one of the Southeast's most dynamic and fast-growing business regions. With strengths in healthcare, advanced manufacturing, technology, tourism, education, and the creative economy, Greater Nashville offers a compelling look at how a region can embrace growth while investing in mobility, innovation, talent, and quality of place. We'll explore how collaboration across business, government, universities, and the community is shaping Nashville's future—and how the city's distinctive culture and creative energy continue to set it apart.

Get ready for big ideas, Southern hospitality, and a little Music City magic!

Lock in your spot or sponsorship early by contacting Michele Howard at mhoward@cobbchamber.org.

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Thank you to our 2026 Attendees

Lauren Abernethy, Atlanta Braves & The Battery Atlanta
Colin Ake, Kennesaw State University
Commissioner Erick Allen, Cobb County Government
Kimberly Allred, Metro Atlanta Chamber
Teri Anulewicz, Capital City Public Affairs
Dr. Tiffany Barney, Cobb Innovation and Technology Academy
Charlie Beirne, Cobb-Marietta Coliseum & Exhibit Hall Authority
Eric Bosman, Kimley-Horn
Chris Britton, Brasfield & Gorrie
Flynn Broady, Cobb County Sheriff's Office
Shaneak Brown, Comcast
Wendy Bunch, RE/MAX PURE
Lindsey Burruss, Cobb Travel & Tourism
Bobby Campbell, McCarthy Building Companies
Melissa Cantrell, CDH Partners
Stacey Chapman, CROFT & Associates
Naceo Denny, Georgia Power
Ryan Ellis, HNTB Corporation
Greer Gallagher, Holder Construction
David Gallmon, Cobb County Sheriff's Office
Sonya Grant, WorkSource Cobb | CobbWorks
Brittney Gray, Visit Marietta
Chris Gruehn, Pinnacle Financial Partners
Jessica Guinn, Cobb County Government
Michele Howard, Cobb Chamber
Dana Johnson, Cobb Chamber
David Jones, Cobb County Sheriff's Office
Solomon Jordan, Gas South
Melanie Kagan, The Center for Family Resources
Jeff Kelley, Colliers International
Greg King, Georgia Institute of Technology
Chad Koenig, Partners
Josh Mackey, Capital City Public Affairs
Coryn Marsik, Kennesaw State Unversity
Chris Martin, Kaiser Permanente
Sharon Mason, Cobb Chamber
Eric McDonald, Georgia Power
James McNabb, Enercon
Kim Menefee, Cumberland Community Improvement District
Michael Oduselu, Axis Infrastructure
Michael Paris, Council for Quality Growth
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Alisha Smith, Town Center Community Improvement District
Ellen Smith, Parker Poe
Tracy Styf, Town Center Community Improvement District
Greg Teague, Croy Engineering
Matt Teague, Walton Communities
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Stephen Vault, Wellstar Health System
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