

2026 Scottsdale City Council Questionnaire

Candidate Name: Ethan Knowlden
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Years in Scottsdale: Since 2018



Motivation, Values, and Governance

Why are you seeking election to Scottsdale City Council?

Running for public office was not on my bucket list. However, I love Scottsdale and want to help preserve the qualities that make our city exceptional while responsibly planning for its future. Scottsdale faces increasing pressure from growth, infrastructure demands, and changing economic conditions. Scottsdale needs thoughtful, transparent leadership—leadership that listens to residents and experts alike and prioritizes consensus over chaos—to balance these forces while protecting neighborhoods and maintaining a high quality of life. I believe my skills, experiences, temperament and energy are needed on this Council.

If elected, what would you most like to accomplish during your term?

My priorities are:

1. Strengthening fiscal discipline and long-term planning
2. Improving public safety and code enforcement
3. Protecting the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and restoring other city parks and recreational facilities
4. Ensuring that growth decisions align with community expectations and the General Plan

Are there any matters that may reasonably come before the City Council in which you would have a potential conflict of interest? If yes, please describe it generally.

I am not aware of any conflicts currently. If any arise, I will disclose them promptly and recuse myself as appropriate.

Governing documents you have reviewed in preparation for your candidacy:

Scottsdale City Charter, Scottsdale General Plan 2035, Scottsdale Character Area Plans, Transportation Plan, Tourism Strategic Plan 2023, Westworld Strategic Plan

Processes: Created, Improved, Reduced, or Eliminated

Please address which City of Scottsdale (COS) or citizen processes you believe should fall into the following categories.

More structured neighborhood input processes. The City of Phoenix utilizes Village Planning Committees to gather hyper-local input on zoning and development proposals. While COGS helps fill part of this gap in Scottsdale, residents often become involved too late, unaware of proposed changes. Permanent, hyper-local committees would support two-way communication between neighborhoods and City Hall, as well as within communities.

Transparency and communication around Council decisions. An imperfect example is the Budget Review Commission (BRC). While BRC preparation and presentations are burdensome on staff, residents benefit from thoughtful, robust dialogue. BRC questions and recommendations lead to meaningful improvements. None of this occurs—or is possible—when the budget is simply presented to Council. We should enhance other Boards and Commissions to similarly improve transparency, communication, and value.

Unnecessary bureaucratic delays. I understand City Manager Caton's desire to protect staff from undue influence and commend efforts to streamline operations. However, restrictions on communication between Council members and staff can impede the flow of information, limit creative problem-solving, and result in work reaching Council that is later questioned or rejected—causing delays. Experienced leadership understands boundaries. We can foster a healthier working relationship while respecting that Council sets policy and does not implement it.

Unclear or inconsistent approval processes. I experienced this firsthand during the DC Ranch Community Center renovation. Our project received approval, only to be delayed due to late departmental input (which led to a complete redesign). Approved construction techniques were later rejected by inspectors, and conflicting guidance was provided. While improvements have been made, further alignment between permitting and inspection is needed.

Conflict Resolution

When faced with disagreement among City Council members, what approach would you take to encourage productive discussion and reach effective outcomes?

I prioritize respectful dialogue, data-driven decision-making, and finding common ground. Councils function best when members listen first and work toward practical compromise. In my legal and business career, I was trained to understand both sides of a negotiation. Without that understanding, mutual agreement is unlikely. Often, early "wins" help build trust. Successful negotiation requires understanding each party's BATNA—Best Alternative to No Agreement—which defines when parties walk away and where common ground can emerge.

Vision, Community, and Quality of Life

Vision for Scottsdale

What is your long-term vision for Scottsdale over the next 10–20 years?

My vision for Scottsdale is a city that remains economically vibrant while preserving neighborhood character, open space, and public safety. Growth should be strategic—not reactive—and aligned with our General Plan and infrastructure capacity. Scottsdale’s long-term success depends on planning and investing now for water sustainability.

Community Engagement

How will you engage with residents and neighborhoods before making policy decisions?

Serving on Council will be my only job. I will engage residents proactively through face-to-face meetings, town halls, and digital platforms before major decisions. I will maintain a public calendar so individuals and groups can schedule time with me. Early, consistent engagement leads to better outcomes and stronger trust.

Public Safety & Neighborhood Quality of Life

What actions would you prioritize to improve public safety and neighborhood quality of life citywide?

Scottsdale benefits from exceptional police and fire staff and leadership. Residents consistently rank public safety as a top priority, and we are fortunate to have the resources to support it. In addition to maintaining strong staffing, we should improve recruitment and retention tools, reduce response times—especially for nuisance issues—and strengthen code enforcement.

Noise Management and Enforcement

Noise management and enforcement have been ongoing concerns in certain areas of Scottsdale, including high-activity and entertainment districts. What is your approach to balancing vibrant activity areas with improved enforcement of existing and future noise standards to protect nearby neighborhoods?

Scottsdale can support vibrant hospitality and entertainment districts while enforcing standards consistently. These areas provide economic and cultural benefits but must be balanced with the needs of adjacent neighborhoods. I support clearer enforcement protocols, accountability for repeat violations, and proactive collaboration between code enforcement, businesses, and residents.

Growth, Land Use, and Housing

Key Issues for City Council

What do you see as the three most important issues currently facing the City Council?

1. Managing growth to sustain the economic vitality of the city while maintaining the city's western heritage and culture
2. Infrastructure development and maintenance, especially water sustainability
3. Fiscal discipline in overseeing a \$2 billion budget
4. BONUS: Restoring Council (and city) reputation. Residents need to feel heard; businesses need to feel welcome.

Key Issues for Residents

What do you see as the three most important issues currently facing the City Council?

1. Neighborhood preservation: Balancing the natural evolution of communities and the demand for housing with the desire to maintain the character and amenities that attracted all of us to Scottsdale.
2. Traffic and congestion: We are at times the victim of our own success, as all the wonderful things in Scottsdale literally drive people to work, shop, dine and entertain themselves here. The city needs to investigate creative solutions to reduce the impact traffic and congestion have on our residents.
3. Cost of living and housing. The rapid acceleration of costs has a disproportionate impact on our senior and veteran communities. These are the people that built and defended our community and way of life. Housing, once comparatively affordable in the Valley, is no longer accessible to our sons and daughters. Redevelopment and infill housing, not high rises, are ways to keep our seniors and veterans, and our families and workers, in Scottsdale.

Land Use and Zoning Framework

How should the General Plan guide rezoning and land use decisions?

The voter-approved General Plan should be the foundation for all land use decisions. Deviations should be rare, built on consensus and public support, and clearly justified.

Land and Zoning Framework

Under what circumstances, if any, do you support increases/decreases in building height or density?

I do not support height increases beyond current zoning. I do support appropriate density increases when infrastructure, location, and community compatibility are addressed. Density preserves open space and can be a way of creating housing for seniors, veterans, families and workers to remain in Scottsdale.

Rural and Low-Density Areas

How should Scottsdale approach rezoning requests affecting rural or low-density areas?

These areas should be preserved, with rezoning requests evaluated carefully and with strong neighborhood input.

Conditional Zoning and Enforcement

What is your view on conditional zoning approvals and compliance enforcement?

Conditional zoning can create mutually beneficial outcomes but must be well-thought out, clearly negotiated, documented, and enforceable. The “Yes, And” approach is much better than “Forever No” as it maintains Scottsdale as a vibrant, desirable city.

Conditional Zoning and Enforcement

Under what conditions should approvals be modified or revoked by City Council action, or allowed to expire?

See above. Well drafted agreements provide the roadmap for modification or revocation.

Conditional Zoning and Enforcement

How would you achieve improved code enforcement?

Policy without enforcement undermines trust. I support code clarification, increased staffing, improved technology to track compliance, and faster resolution of violations.

Major Redevelopment Projects

What principles should guide City Council decisions on large-scale redevelopment projects that significantly affect surrounding neighborhoods or infrastructure?

Decisions should prioritize compatibility, infrastructure capacity, traffic impact, and community input. When done right, redevelopment can revitalize neighborhoods, create desirable amenities and support responsible housing creation.

Housing Affordability and Workforce Housing

What role, if any, should the city play in addressing housing affordability for workforce residents?

While Scottsdale will remain a premium market, the city should support responsible housing development for seniors, veterans, families and workers within the framework of the General Plan. We need to change how the city is viewed, from being part of the problem to being part of the solution.

Economy, Infrastructure, and City Operations

Water Sustainability

Following the shift from the 2024 Sustainability Plan to the current Sustainability Task Force, what is your vision for Scottsdale's long-term water resiliency? Specifically, how would you prioritize competing needs such as the expansion of the **Advanced Water Treatment facility** for direct potable reuse, **continued aquifer 'banking'**, and community-facing incentives like **turf removal rebates**?

We need to reaffirm our commitment to the Scottsdale Water Strategic Plan 2025–2030 and move aggressively on the capital investments outlined in that plan. These include implementing automated meter infrastructure, improving groundwater recovery and SRP pumping capabilities, introducing Advanced Purified Recycled Water into direct potable reuse, and participating in regional efforts such as discussions surrounding Bartlett Dam and additional APRW facilities.

Transportation and Infrastructure

What priorities should guide updates to the Transportation Master Plan?

Personal vehicles will remain primary, but congestion solutions must extend beyond road expansion. The city should collaborate with regional partners, evaluate bus rapid transit, and consider restoring trolley routes. Safety for drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists must remain a priority, as well as maintenance of our transportation infrastructure, primarily our roads.

Transportation and Infrastructure

How should parking needs be addressed, particularly in high-activity areas?

Parking decisions should be data driven. A formal parking study for Old Town/Downtown is needed before making investments. Smart planning to reduce parking need, consideration of shared parking solutions, and investment in wayfinding should be prioritized.

Entertainment and Activity Districts

What considerations should guide the creation, regulation, and ongoing oversight of entertainment or special activity districts?

These districts are valuable economic assets but require clear regulations, consistent enforcement, and ongoing dialogue to balance activity with livability in adjacent neighborhoods. More specifically, see my comments regarding Noise Management, above.

Short-Term Rentals and Neighborhood Impacts

What tools should cities have to manage short-term rentals and mitigate neighborhood impacts?

Short-term rentals are a vital part of the mix of accommodations for visitors to Scottsdale. Their

presence should not destroy neighborhoods. We need stronger tools, including registration requirements and more rapid enforcement mechanisms, limits on guests per residence, and stiffer penalties for bad actors. The city should also investigate the best practices of other tourist destinations, including the conversion of STRs to other residential uses.

Economic Development and Tourism

What role should the City Council and city administration play in economic development partnerships, tourism promotion, and cultural investments?

A vital task for the city is to create a foundation for economic success. This includes developing and maintaining our infrastructure, investing in public safety and public amenities that make the city attractive for business and personal relocation, then working creatively in partnership with private groups to support economic development, tourism, and cultural events and institutions.

Fiscal Policy and Accountability

Fiscal Sustainability

Fiscal sustainability is often debated but rarely defined. To understand your approach to the city's long-term financial health:

How do you personally define "Fiscal Sustainability" for the City of Scottsdale?

In typical times Scottsdale should run a balanced budget on an operating level. But the true picture is more complicated. It is not enough to be able to run city operations; Scottsdale must also have money to maintain its infrastructure and must set aside additional funds in reserve. Long-term debt should be utilized primarily to finance the building of new infrastructure. Scottsdale has done a good job building reserves and keeping its debt burden modest. Combined with a strong revenue base, the city has been able to maintain a AAA credit rating, keeping our borrowing costs low. But many of the projects in the 2019 Bond measure were maintenance or renovation-related, suggesting we may not have done a good job maintaining city assets out of annual revenues. In sum, Scottsdale has a strong revenue base, a modest debt burden, and sufficient reserves to absorb unanticipated expenses over the relatively short term. But long-term planning, especially around growing maintenance obligations, is key.

What priority level should the Council assign to sustainability versus immediate community needs?

As growth moderates, sustainability should become a greater focus for the Council. Thanks to our strong revenue base, this focus need not be at the expense of current community needs.

What specific actions would you take to ensure the Council remains focused on these principles during the budget process?

I see great benefit in the Budget Review Committee, as it provides transparency into our budget process, and creates a forum to pressure-test staff assumptions and encourage rigorous multi-year

forecasting and performance-based budgeting. This doesn't get the Council off the hook, however. Council needs to clearly communicate the goals and objectives for approved spending and work with staff to define appropriate metrics. Which is not to say we spend only on things that can be measured, as some things (e.g., quality of life) defy easy measurement. Decision-making should be data-driven but not data-exclusive.

Revenue and Expenditures

The city must constantly balance its income sources with its service obligations. What specific principles should guide your decisions to create, increase, or eliminate city revenue sources (e.g., taxes, fees, or bonds)?

Creating or eliminating revenue sources should be based on principles and reality. Principles should include stability of source over time (predictable), fair allocation of tax burden across residents, businesses and visitors (ability to pay and benefit received), alignment with policy goals (are desired outcomes being achieved), simplicity and transparency (securing public trust), and diversification (multiple sources). Now the reality: Scottsdale is heavily reliant on sales tax and tourism-related revenues. These volatile sources generate five times as much annual revenue for the city as more stable property taxes, \$200 million versus \$40 million. This ratio is not expected to change.

How would you prioritize spending when city revenues exceed expectations versus when they fall short?

Surpluses should address deferred maintenance and fund reserves, notably pension reserves, which remain below desired levels. During shortfalls, essential services (public safety, public utilities such as water, sewer, and solid waste collection, and debt service) take priority. Unfortunately, during such times quality of life expenditures such as parks programming and library hours must be reduced, capital projects are delayed and city staffing is typically frozen.

Departmental Performance and Accountability

Defining a budget is only the first step; ensuring those funds are used effectively is the second. How would you improve transparency and performance measurement across city departments?

At a high-level, see my comments on the Budget Review Committee, and the creation of hyper-local committees, above. Public dashboards, improved website design, and performance metrics can also enhance transparency.

What metrics or "red flags" would you look for to determine if a department is being held accountable for its spending and results?

Key warning signs include cost overruns or unspent funds, persistent staffing vacancies or excessive turnover, lack of measurable outcomes or failure to achieve agreed targets, and recurring internal or external complaints.

Regional and State Relations

Representing Scottsdale at the State Level

Cities do not control state legislation, but they are often affected by it. How would you approach working with state legislators and regional partners to communicate Scottsdale's interests and concerns on state-level issues that impact the city?

Scottsdale has failed to maintain good direct relations with state and regional authorities, to its detriment. While this is improving more needs to be done. I would build on relationships I have already established with current and former state legislators and department leadership at state and regional levels to solidify lines of communication. We need to advocate directly for our interests through clear communication and data-driven positions. Scottsdale cannot rely solely on the advocacy of the League of Cities & Towns, as our needs and desires differ from time to time to those of the broader League membership. Further, Mesa, Chandler, Gilbert, Glendale and soon Peoria are of the same or similar size to Scottsdale. Scottsdale needs to build coalitions with these other municipalities when appropriate.

Civic Leadership & Final Insights

Please list organizations, civic volunteer involvement, and any Scottsdale boards, commissions, or task forces you have served on, including the year(s).

I have served as President of the DC Ranch Community Council (2023–2025), President of the Scottsdale Industrial Development Authority (2024–2025), and as a board member of the Arizona Housing Coalition (2023–present). I have also volunteered with St. Vincent de Paul, Habitat for Humanity, and United Food Bank. I completed Scottsdale's Government 101 Academy and Police Citizens Academy.

Since deciding to run, I have engaged extensively with civic leaders and community members to ensure I am fully prepared to serve.

Additional Comments

Please share any additional information you believe would help voters better understand your approach to city government leadership.

I am committed to transparent, accountable leadership rooted in decorum, respect, and common sense. I love Scottsdale and intend to lead with that love, ensuring Scottsdale remains a great place to live, work, and visit. Scottsdale is a unique city with diverse neighborhoods, but we are one community. Serving all residents will be my sole focus. It will be a great honor to serve this city.