



Arizona Association for  
Economic Development

STILETTO

# Strategic Plan

2026-2030

Arizona Association for Economic Development



# Leading With Purpose

## Message from the President and President-Elect

The Arizona Association for Economic Development (AAED) exists to support economic development professionals and to advance the practice of economic development across Arizona. That purpose guided us throughout the development of this strategic plan.

Over the past several months and throughout this process, we asked you—our members and leaders—to reflect on what AAED does well and where the organization should focus its efforts in the years ahead. Your thoughtful feedback shaped this plan. It reinforces the importance of education, professional development, and meaningful connection, while also providing clearer direction for AAED's role in advocacy and statewide engagement.

We are presenting this plan to you together as President and President-Elect because we believe continuity in leadership matters. AAED's work extends beyond any single term, and by partnering closely along with our Executive Committee and Board leadership, we are committed to ensuring steady,

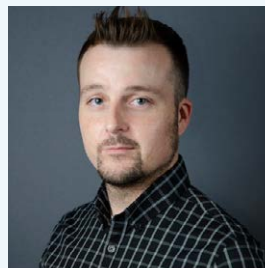
forward-looking leadership that remains aligned across transitions. This strategic plan represents that shared commitment.

We view this plan as more than a document. It is a practical roadmap for the next several years, grounded in AAED's mission and values and focused squarely on serving you. We are confident it positions AAED to continue delivering meaningful value and to strengthen Arizona's economic development community.

Thank you for your engagement, your leadership, and your commitment to the profession. It is an honor to serve you, and we look forward to the work ahead.



**JENNIFER LINDLEY,**  
AZED Pro  
*President (2025-2026)*



**HEATH VESCOVI-CHIORDI,** AZED Pro  
*President (2026-2027)*

# Message from the Chief Executive Officer

AAED exists to serve, support, and elevate economic development professionals—and that responsibility deserves intentional direction. That’s why I’m excited to share that we are embarking on the next phase of our strategic plan.

A strategic plan is a shared roadmap that helps us prioritize what matters most, align our resources with our vision and mission, and make thoughtful decisions in a rapidly changing economic landscape. For a membership organization like ours, this approach ensures we are not simply reacting to trends but proactively shaping the future of our profession and delivering meaningful value to you.

As CEO, I have a responsibility to our Board, our members, and our partners to lead with clarity and accountability. That means setting a clear vision, executing against it, and—just as importantly—being transparent about our progress along the way. This strategic plan will guide our work, establish measurable goals, and provide a framework for regular communication so you can see how ideas turn into action.

What excites me most about this moment is the opportunity ahead.

Economic development professionals are facing unprecedented challenges—and unprecedented opportunities. AAED is uniquely positioned to convene, educate, advocate, and innovate in ways that truly move the needle for the profession. This plan reflects not only where we are today, but where we aspire to go together.

Thank you for your continued engagement, trust, and commitment to this organization. I look forward to sharing updates as we move from strategy to execution and to building the future of our association with you.



**KATIE HURST**  
*Chief Executive Officer*

# Arizona's Unified Economic Development Voice

## ABOUT THE ARIZONA ASSOCIATION FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Arizona Association for Economic Development is the statewide professional association for economic development practitioners and partners across Arizona. AAED convenes public, private, nonprofit, academic, and utility stakeholders who contribute to economic development outcomes in communities across the state.

## OUR ROLE IN ARIZONA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM

AAED strengthens the practice of economic development statewide by:

- Supporting professional growth through education and peer learning
- Providing credible, nonpartisan insight and advocacy support
- Creating a connected statewide network and collaboration platform
- Elevating professional standards, ethics, and public understanding

## SUPPORTING A DIVERSE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY

AAED's membership includes multiple groups and stakeholders with different needs and constraints. The strategic plan is committed to supporting each of these segments as follows:

PRACTITIONERS

EMERGING PROFESSIONALS

PROVIDERS AND PARTNERS

RURAL COMMUNITIES

SMALLER COMMUNITIES

TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

# Strengthening Economic Development in Arizona

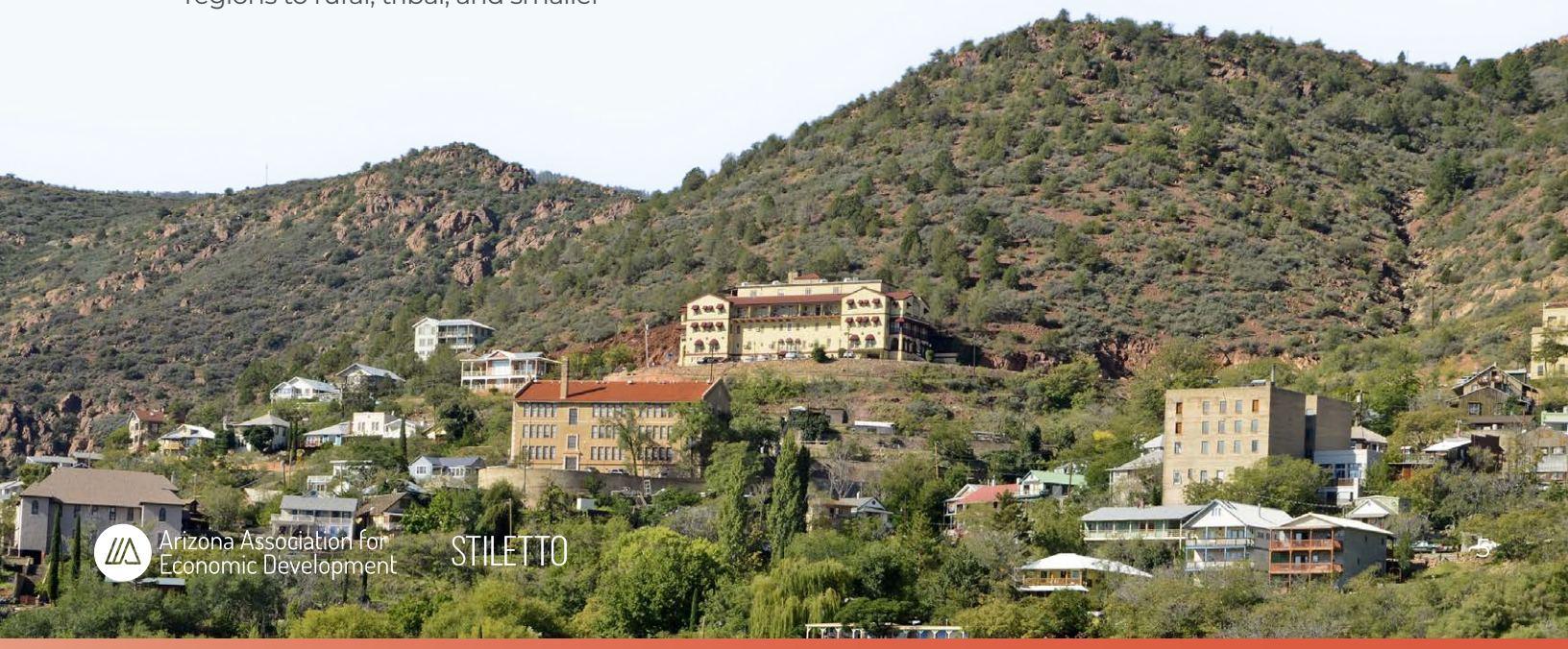
The Strategic Plan 2026-2030 outlines how AAED will focus its collective efforts to support economic development professionals and to advance the impact of economic development across Arizona. The plan positions AAED to respond to a changing economic landscape while remaining grounded in its core mission as the state's professional association for the field.

The plan translates AAED's mandate into clear priorities: Educate, Advocate, and Collaborate. These pillars reinforce professional excellence, meaningful member engagement, and statewide connection. These priorities ensure AAED remains relevant, credible, and responsive to the needs of practitioners and partners across Arizona.

Collaboration and connection are central to AAED's role. By convening public, private, nonprofit, academic, and utility stakeholders, AAED strengthens industry knowledge, peer learning, and professional standards. These relationships support professionals working in diverse contexts, from large metropolitan regions to rural, tribal, and smaller

communities. Collaborative relationships also reinforce a shared commitment to ethical and effective economic development. Reflecting AAED's commitment to collaboration, the development of this strategic plan was informed by input from committee leadership, board members, and stakeholder survey findings through the process.

This plan recognizes the need for adaptable skills, applied learning, and informed engagement. Priorities include strengthening professional capacity, improving access to education and leadership pathways, and ensuring AAED remains a trusted, nonpartisan voice for the profession.



# Forces Shaping AAED's Future

Economic development in Arizona is operating in an increasingly complex and evolving environment. Federal and state policies and funding structures, workforce and housing constraints, infrastructure capacity, technological change, and rising public expectations are reshaping what the profession requires. While AAED does not control these external forces, it plays a critical role in helping practitioners understand, adapt, and respond effectively.

**The profession has shifted from a primary focus on attraction and marketing to one centered on making sure projects succeed.**

Economic development professionals now manage grants, coordinate workforce efforts, oversee infrastructure improvements, meet regulations, and track results. The role has become more hands-on and complex, requiring strong practical skills and problem solving. AAED has a leading role to play in helping members build those skills.

**Community competitiveness is increasingly determined by readiness rather than incentives alone.** Having a

skilled workforce, adequate housing, reliable infrastructure, and strong partnerships determines whether projects move forward. AAED supports economic development professionals in working across many sectors to support growth.

**Public understanding has not kept pace with the profession's growing complexity.**

With greater scrutiny of public investment, clear communication and transparency are essential. AAED helps members explain their work and build trust with elected officials, partners, and communities.



# Insights From Across the Community

The development of this strategic plan was informed by input from over 100 stakeholders, including committee leadership, board members, and stakeholder survey findings. These

insights directly informed the pillars and recommendations of the strategic plan, reflecting a balance between building on strengths and addressing emerging challenges.

## EXISTING STRENGTHS

Key strengths noted by stakeholders include:

- **Strong organizational culture:** Members consistently describe AAED as welcoming, collegial, and professionally supportive.
- **High-level educational training:** The quality of AAED's education is a core asset. Programs are viewed as relevant, practical, and grounded in real-world experience.
- **Strategic partnerships and stakeholder relationships:** Mentorship and peer learning are especially important to members.
- **In-person knowledge sharing:** AAED's conferences (i.e., signature events) remain a highly valued anchor for the organization.

## WHERE TO FOCUS NEXT

The following priorities were identified by stakeholders:

- **Clear advocacy roles:** While advocacy is viewed as important, members and leaders identified a need for greater clarity on AAED's role as an advocate at both the municipal and state levels.
- **New leadership pathways:** Members are looking for structured leadership and professional development that supports advancement.
- **Increased staff capacity and specialization:** As the scope and complexity of AAED's work continue to grow, members recognize the need for greater staff capacity.
- **Inclusive member access:** Accessibility remains a concern, particularly for members outside major metropolitan areas.

# Guided by Our Vision, Mission, and Values

AAED's vision, mission, and values underscore its commitment to leading economic development in Arizona. These components provide a shared foundation for the strategic plan, setting expectations for how AAED serves its members, makes decisions, and represents the broader economic development community across Arizona.

## Vision

**AAED is the trusted leader for Arizona's economic development community, promoting a vibrant and diverse economy.** This vision reflects AAED's role as a credible, statewide organization that supports professionals working to strengthen economic development in Arizona. Trust is central to this role. It is built through consistency, professional integrity, and the delivery of meaningful value to members and partners. A vibrant and diverse economy depends on strong local capacity, informed leadership, and collaboration across regions and centers. This level of service is what AAED aims to provide to Arizona.

## Mission

**AAED serves as Arizona's unified voice for responsible economic development through education, advocacy, and statewide collaboration.** This mission emphasizes AAED's role as a connector and convener, rather than a project implementer. Education supports professional growth and applied learning. Advocacy focuses on informed, non-partisan engagement that reflects member perspectives and professional standards. Statewide collaboration ensures that professionals across Arizona, regardless of geography or organizational size, have opportunities to learn, contribute, and lead. This is the mission for a strong AAED.

## VALUES

AAED's values guide how it operates and how it supports the profession:

PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE

ETHICAL PRACTICE

STATEWIDE INCLUSION

COLLABORATION

PRACTICAL LEARNING

INNOVATION

MEMBER-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

## PILLARS

This strategic plan is built on an established set of pillars. Each pillar is focused on clear goals and sample actions. Pillars are supported by a practical implementation roadmap. Designed to work together, the pillars reinforce one another and reflect the realities of how AAED creates value for its members and the profession.

EDUCATE

Build capability

ADVOCATE

Build awareness

COLLABORATE

Build connection

SUSTAIN

Build capacity

## PILLAR 1:

# EDUCATE



### **Elevate the profession and expand economic development capacity**

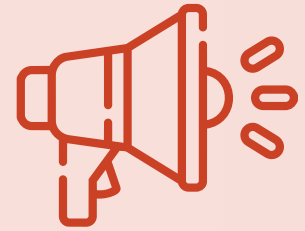
AAED serves as Arizona's leading engine for economic development professional learning. The organization will build on a foundation of education as its most consistently cited strength and core value for members. This pillar positions AAED as Arizona's premier talent engine for economic development.

#### **Why This Pillar Matters**

This pillar supports members who are seeking learning that is increasingly applied and grounded in real-world practice. Educational programming is guided by established best practices and standards in the profession and shaped by peer experience. The pillar also addresses the need for more accessible learning opportunities for professionals outside of the Phoenix metropolitan area. This approach ensures that high-quality professional development and knowledge exchange are available statewide.

#### **Strategic Recommendations**

- 1.1** Build structured learning journeys for practitioners organized by career stage.
- 1.2** Launch a Leadership Academy with mentorship and succession support.
- 1.3** Expand Economic Development Master Class for elected officials and community partners.
- 1.4** Modernize education content with emphasis on data, AI, readiness, communications, and delivery.
- 1.5** Strengthen experiential learning through Arizona Gems and site-based case studies.



## Strengthen the voice and influence of the economic development industry

AAED serves as a trusted, credible voice, advocating for the issues that matter to its members and their constituencies, particularly when those groups are unable to advocate for themselves. The pillar positions AAED as a leading voice for the economic development profession, strengthening public understanding of economic development practice statewide.

### Why This Pillar Matters

While members agree that advocacy is important, they seek greater clarity on its scope, boundaries, and the guiding decision-making framework. This pillar explains how AAED leads through insight, education, and shared understanding, rather than a partisan approach. AAED can align with member expectations while protecting credibility, neutrality, and long-term reputation.

### Strategic Recommendations

- 2.1** Adopt a clear advocacy decision framework.
- 2.2** Strengthen government relations capacity and member intelligence.
- 2.3** Build member advocacy capability through training and tools.
- 2.4** Lead statewide economic development learning and awareness.

## PILLAR 3:

# COLLABORATE



### Create a connected, high-value network across Arizona

AAED strengthens statewide connections, reduce regional isolation, and increase collaboration across sectors and geographies. This pillar places high value on AAED's sense of community and reinforces the organization as the connective tissue for Arizona's economic development ecosystem.

#### Why This Pillar Matters

The pillar aims to make community engagement more inclusive and accessible across Arizona. As hybrid learning and work formats become increasingly preferred, this pillar addresses the practical travel and budget constraints faced by members outside the Phoenix metropolitan area.

#### Strategic Recommendations

- 3.1** Establish a predictable schedule of statewide engagement.
- 3.2** Expand rural, tribal, and cross-sector participation.
- 3.3** Strengthen committee effectiveness and cross-committee alignment.
- 3.4** Maintain flagship conferences while evolving meeting formats.

# Elevating Professionals. Advancing Communities. Strengthening Arizona.

## Stay in Touch

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