

The Story of Keep Sedona Beautiful: Celebrating our First 50 Years



How the Idea Started

In the 1960's, the spectacular landscapes of Sedona and the Verde Valley were marred by a blight of billboards, tasteless business signs and abundant litter on the roads. Groups such as the Sedona Garden Club, the Chamber of Commerce and the "Keep Sedona Beautiful Committee" worked to remove the most offensive billboards that marred scenic viewsheds, particularly on Highway 179 leading into Sedona. Their efforts were so successful that in 1966 Sedona was named one of the 10 cleanest small towns in the country.

Unfortunately, the situation gradually worsened. Litter became an increasing problem and business signs were uncontrolled in unincorporated Sedona. The unsightly nature of the town was highlighted in a 1971 Arizona Republic article that talked about "honky-tonk, cluttered Sedona."

On April 6, 1971 a group of sixteen concerned citizens met at the home of Norman McGee, at the urging of his wife Eileen McGee and of Maleese Black. In that meeting, the Keep Sedona Beautiful Committee was revived. According to Norman McGee, *"The primary aim of this group, which is composed of business people and interested citizens and which has been endorsed by several civic organizations, should be, as its name implies, an attempt to devise ways and means to help in keeping Sedona beautiful in the face of ever rapidly increasing growth."*

The Keep Sedona Beautiful Committee used the power of persuasion to convince a number of businesses to take down 'high-rise' business signs, including one at the Circle K on Highway 179. Other businesses replaced gaudy storefront signs with more tasteful ones. The committee held its first litter lifting drive on December 11, 1971.

Norman McGee became the driving force behind the group, which was incorporated on May 17, 1972 as Keep Sedona Beautiful, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The motto adopted by the newly formed group was "Keep Sedona Beautiful, It's Good Business."

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Over the subsequent 50 years, Keep Sedona Beautiful (KSB) has evolved with the times while continuing to fulfill the primary aim voiced by our founder and first President Norman McGee. We have been at the forefront of civic and environmental activism, focusing on programs and initiatives fostered during the very earliest years of the organization:

- Keeping our roads clean of litter
- Eliminating gaudy or intrusive signs
- Encouraging tasteful building design
- Retaining and enhancing our dark skies
- Fostering responsible land use and growth
- Protecting our precious water resources and our environment
- Living sustainably
- Using native plants for landscaping
- Honoring excellence in the community
- Controlling noise pollution and curbing OHV damage
- Protecting our public lands
- Helping address traffic problems
- Educating the public through our speaker series

As you'll see below, KSB has been active in all of these areas for the last half-century and will continue to advocate for a more beautiful and sustainable Verde Valley over the next 50 years.

This is the story of Keep Sedona Beautiful.

Decade 1: 1972 to 1981

The initial objectives of Keep Sedona Beautiful were:

- To assist in the preservation of the natural beauty of Sedona and its surroundings by all practical means.
- To encourage the construction of the buildings in harmony with the character of the area and keep them compatible with the "Western" or "Spanish" style of architecture.
- To seek the cooperation of builders and developers, when undertaking any construction, to save as many of the trees and plants on the site as possible, and to disturb the earth as little as possible.
- To encourage commercial establishments and home owners to plant trees and shrubbery on their premises.
- To suggest signs should be western in character, preferably made of wood and low in height. If illuminated, signs should be lighted externally and with no suggestion of motion. However, we encourage variety and individuality.

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- To foster regular clean-up days. To encourage property owners to maintain neat and orderly premises. To see that trash containers are maintained in strategic locations in business areas.
- To stimulate a spirit of civic pride among all residents, including youth organizations, and to encourage their participation in the activities of Keep Sedona Beautiful, Inc.
- To provide appropriate recognition to public-spirited citizens who have done an outstanding job in building design or re-design, sign treatment or landscaping, or who have in any other manner contributed to signal improvement in the physical appearance of the community.

Our first Awards of Excellence ceremony was held on November 15, 1972 when 16 businesses were honored for excellence in the treatment of their business properties and for sign design. KSB has bestowed well over 500 awards since, expanding the categories to include such things as Community Service, Cultural Heritage, Dark Sky Lighting, Education, Environmental Stewardship, Landscaping and Sustainability.

We contributed a weekly article to the Red Rock News discussing issues of concern and advocating for citizen action and involvement. In our first decade, we drew attention to the following:

- The dangers of toxic herbicides
- The need to curb roadside litter
- The importance of recycling
- The need to conserve energy and our natural resources
- The importance of consuming healthy food
- Protecting our dark skies and limiting light pollution
- The value of natural open space
- The need for a “Bottle Bill” requiring deposits to encourage recycling
- Sustainability through moderating our consumption of resources
- The threat that OHV use poses
- The need to permanently protect our public lands
- The value of composting
- The need to conserve water
- “The environment is our economy”

In 1976, KSB held our first Native Plant Workshop. This popular annual event has educated thousands of attendees over the years on how to landscape more responsibly and sustainably.

During our first decade, Sedona was not incorporated and had no city government. Regulations and codes were the province of either Coconino or Yavapai County, depending on where you lived. In many ways, KSB functioned as a de-facto city government, providing guidance that relied on voluntary compliance.

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- In 1977 we issued “Guidelines for Signs”, a pamphlet laying out a clear set of voluntary rules for businesses to follow. These were updated in 1979.
- In 1979 we issued “Guidelines for Architectural Design”, a companion pamphlet of voluntary rules for good building design.
- We worked directly with a number of businesses such as A&W, First National Bank and Chevron as they designed buildings, greatly improving the aesthetics of those designs.
- For example, we convinced both KFC and the Standard Oil gas station to install low-rise signs instead signs 20 or 30 feet tall.
- KSB placed trash containers around uptown Sedona.
- We initiated an erosion control project in the Chapel Bells Estates area.
- We held twice annual citywide cleanup days both in Sedona and at Slide Rock which was not yet a state park.
- We funded and installed 94 road name signs in the Village of Oak Creek and Sedona.

KSB received a number of awards in recognition of our efforts: 2 separate awards from the US Forest Service in 1975, an award from the Arizona Wildlife Foundation for outstanding contribution to conservation in 1978, the Governor’s Award for "Soil Conservationist of the Year" in 1978 and another Governor's Award for the “Development of Guidelines for Effective Signs and Architectural Design."

In short, during our first decade, KSB advocated for action on the entire range of issues we continue to focus on today. At first glance, this may seem as if we’re still fighting the same battles as 50 years ago. The reality is quite different. Sedona has retained its beauty and controlled its growth because of the ongoing efforts of KSB and like-minded organizations.

Decade 2: 1982 to 1991

During our second decade and throughout our 50 years of service to the Verde Valley, Keep Sedona Beautiful has continued to lift litter from our roads, organize citywide cleanups, celebrate service through our Awards of Excellence and advocate for the use of native plants in landscaping.

We became more active in the area of public land protection, providing input to the National Forest Management Plan and opposing the rash of land trades where developers swapped their open space for national forest land that could be more profitably developed. A 1984 article in the Arizona Republic lauded these and other efforts by KSB. Similarly, we supported smart sustainable development while vigorously opposing inappropriate development proposals.

In 1984, Oak Creek was designated a “Unique Arizona Water” and Hwy 89A through Oak Creek was designated Arizona’s first “Scenic Road”. Both initiatives were championed vigorously by KSB.

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Environmental advocacy continued to be a key focus of the organization. In a Red Rock News article on July 11, 1986, we warned of the dangers of what we now call “greenwashing,” by which corporations convey a false impression or provide misleading information about how their products or processes are environmentally sound. We opposed placement of utility lines on ridges and advocated for burying utility lines. We commissioned a groundwater study and warned about the overuse of toxic pesticides and herbicides. In 1988, we donated \$5,000 to an advocacy group studying the impact of pollution on Oak Creek. The health of Oak Creek has been a major concern of ours since our founding, as has the need to protect the Verde River.

KSB has long advocated for permanent protection of our public lands, beginning with a 1989 initiative to have the lands around Sedona designated a National Scenic Area. This proposal was again raised in 1999 and an initiative to form a National Monument was proposed in 2015. None of these controversial initiatives received the type of broad support required for adoption.

We’ve also been a vocal advocate for making the Verde Valley a more sustainable and more beautiful place to live. In 1982, KSB strongly supported creation of a sanitary district which was approved on July 19, 1982. While the initial referendum to incorporate Sedona itself was defeated in 1985, a second referendum was overwhelmingly passed on December 2, 1987.

Incorporation marked a turning point for Sedona. Many of the informal roles played by KSB would now be codified into law by the city. KSB cooperated with the newly formed City of Sedona by providing advice and assistance. We gave the city \$4,000 to purchase new mapping software, helped create and pass a sign ordinance, supported a wastewater treatment plant bond measure and identified solutions to traffic issues via a task force. As Sedona grew and flourished, so did Keep Sedona Beautiful.

KSB and our most active members continued to be recognized. We received a commendation from President Reagan in 1982 for Outstanding Volunteer Service. Our founder Norman McGee was named the 1983 Sedonan of the Year by the Rotary Club. In 1988, member Margaret Flynn was named Citizen of the Year by the Board of Realtors and in 1989, board member Si Birch was named Citizen of the Year by the Red Rock News.

Decade 3: 1992 to 2001

Beginning in 1992, KSB has advocated for diversified and affordable housing. Over the decades it has become increasingly more expensive to afford housing for both renters and homeowners. We’ve also urged for more hiking and biking paths while continuing to work on finding solutions for traffic congestion.

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In 1993, attendees heard renowned geologist, Wayne Ranney, speak at a KSB Speaker Series event. Nearly 30 years later, in 2021, he gave a virtual presentation due to the limitations placed on in-person events due to COVID.

Our commitment to preserving and protecting open spaces and public land has never wavered. We urged citizens to contribute to updating the Forest Service Management Plan and helped form an alliance opposed to land trades. We have long advocated for adequate funding for the US Forest Service. We have also regularly drawn attention to danger of wildland fire in the Verde Valley.

In 1996, we formed the Land Preservation Task Force that over the subsequent years raised over \$18 million dollars to purchase 513 acres of sensitive land, which was then donated to the National Forest. KSB played a pivotal role in creating Amendment 12 of the Forest Service Plan. Since the adoption of Amendment 12 and its eventual incorporation directly into the Coconino National Forest Management Plan, land trades on approximately 160,000 acres in the Sedona area have been prohibited.

Our current office and meeting rooms in the Pushmataha Building were donated to KSB by Susan Coleman in 1994 “for environmental purposes.” This incredibly generous gift has made it possible for KSB to sponsor hundreds of meetings, workshops and events educating the public on key issues facing our community.

Members of KSB helped form Friends of the Forest in 1994. This all-volunteer group continues to work directly with the Red Rock District of the Coconino National Forest to both fund and staff projects and initiatives that the Forest Service would otherwise not complete. It has become the most active volunteer group on any National Forest district in the nation.

In fact, members of Keep Sedona Beautiful have played key roles in the formation of a number of important local organizations including:

- The Verde Valley Chapter of the Arizona Archeological Society
- The Sedona Academy which later became the Verde Valley Forum
- Sedona Recycles
- The Verde Valley Land Preservation Institute
- The Water Wise Alliance
- The Greater Sedona Fund for the Environment
- The Verde River Basin Partnership
- The Sustainability Alliance
- Save Our Ancient Red Rocks

In 1994, KSB received recognition from the Sedona Sunrise Kiwanis. KSB Litter Lifters won the Governor's Pride in Arizona Award in 1997. Barb Zerscke was named Citizen of the Year by the

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Red Rock News for her tireless work as head of the Litter Lifters and past President Carl Fleissbach was named 1999 Citizen of the Year, also by the Red Rock News.

Decade 4: 2002 to 2011

Our fourth decade saw another controversial issue arise: the plan to upgrade Hwy 179 through the Village of Oak Creek to “the Y” in Sedona, where it intersects with Hwy 89A. Keep Sedona Beautiful opposed the Arizona Department of Transportation’s (ADOT) plan to build a 5-lane thoroughfare through some of the most scenic land in the world. The ensuing controversy and acrimony became so great that a separate group, Voice of Choice, formed to address the issue. In 2001, the newly elected Sedona City Council overturned the prior City resolution favoring the 5-lane thoroughfare. A ‘charrette’ group process fostered citizen involvement through a series of interactive meetings. The process arrived at a set of alternative designs that met citizen needs and desires. A vote was held in 2005 on the final 3 contending plans, resulting in the current configuration completed in 2008.

Keep Sedona Beautiful authored and championed the covered load ordinance that was adopted by Sedona in 2006, reducing the amount of litter falling from trucks and vehicles. We continued to advocate for preserving our dark skies by shielding lights and installing limited but sufficient lighting along Hwy 89A.

We engaged students and citizens by initiating both a student poster contest and a photo contest and by awarding college scholarships to high school seniors. We also held 6 environmentally themed workshops free of charge in 2008, thanks to a generous grant from the Arizona Community Foundation.

At the suggestion of Keep Sedona Beautiful and other like-minded organizations, then-governor Janet Napolitano declared April 2008 Water Awareness Month, highlighting our ongoing focus on water quality and availability. Each April, the State of Arizona focuses on water issues during Water Awareness Month.

This decade saw even more accolades for KSB:

- We earned the 2002 ADOT multi-state award for litter lifting.
- In 2005 KSB Litter Lifters were honored by the City of Sedona.
- In 2006 Litter Lifters received the Governor's Pride in Arizona Award.
- KSB's Bill Eich was named the 2002 Sedona Red Rock News Citizen of the Year.
- In 2004, Justine and Bill Kusner of KSB won the Volunteers of the Year Award from the Greater Sedona Community Foundation.
- That same year the Greater Sedona Community Foundation named KSB their Nonprofit of the Year.
- Also in 2004, the Nature Conservancy honored KSB for outstanding contributions to land, water and habitat protection.

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- In 2007, we received the Verde Valley Stewardship Award from the National Forest Service for work by the Land Preservation Task Force.
- In 2009, we received a Certificate of Achievement from the National Wildlife Federation naming our grounds a Certified Wildlife Habitat™.

Decade 5: 2012 to 2021

Our most recent decade of service has resulted in a number of significant accomplishments in the areas of dark skies, noise abatement, protection of public lands and land use & planning.

Our focus on dark skies led to Sedona adopting a Dark Sky Policy in 2014 and Sedona being named the world's 8th dark sky community by the International Dark-Sky Association. Led by Joanne Kendrick, KSB helped the Village of Oak Creek obtain dark sky community designation in 2016, followed in 2018 by Camp Verde and 2019 by Cottonwood. Our focus on the intrinsic value of dark skies began shortly after our founding and resulted in the Verde Valley being recognized world-wide as a place to enjoy some of the best stargazing in the United States. The momentum is growing, as nearby Tuzigoot and Montezuma National Monuments seek dark sky designation while Yavapai County seems poised to also seek it

Noise abatement, particularly from sight-seeing helicopters, has long been a focus of KSB. After 5 years of diligent work, agreement was reached to reduce helicopter noise in Sedona. Mike Yarbrough of KSB was instrumental in reaching this landmark voluntary agreement that establishes "No-Fly Zones" and minimum altitudes. Both of these restrictions have resulted in less noise pollution for both residents and visitors.

When the Coconino National Forest solicited comments and suggestions for its draft management plan, a massive and critical document, a working team from Keep Sedona Beautiful analyzed the entire plan and submitted 58 pages of comments. We also supported the Red Rock District by sponsoring Trail Days to work repairing the trails and by committing \$1,000 a year for 5 years to the Sedona Trail Keepers program.

We engaged in grass roots advocacy that resulted in stopping the proposed Chapel area water tank to be located within one quarter mile of a wilderness area, halting proposed new bridges across Oak Creek and blocking a roadway across the east side of Airport Mesa.

Keep Sedona Beautiful strongly opposed a number of huge development proposals in the Verde Valley including the El Rojo Grande development west of Sedona. A developer proposed to put 600 manufactured homes and a 50+ unit RV park on 173 acres off of Hwy 89A. The proposal called for the developer to continue to own the land on which owners of manufactured homes would rent their plots. KSB and others in the community felt that this business model is rapacious and benefits the developer at the expense of the resident. Prior to being heard by the

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Yavapai County Board of Supervisors, the developer withdrew their proposal. Subsequently a private party purchased the entire 173 acres with the intent of keeping it one property.

We also strongly opposed the massive project being proposed for the Spring Creek Ranch property located between Sedona and Cottonwood south of Hwy 89A. Initially proposed for 3,000 units located on either side of Spring Creek, it was later revised to reflect 2,100 units. This proposal also called for the developer to continue to own the land on which owners of manufactured homes would rent their plots. Before the revised proposal was heard, the developer withdrew it and instead convinced the City of Cottonwood to annex the property along with 11 square miles of National Forest land. The developer has not yet submitted a formal development proposal to the City of Cottonwood.

In late 2020, Yavapai County initiated a project to update the County Comprehensive Plan as required every 10 years by the State of Arizona. This plan will be critical in guiding development in unincorporated areas of the county over the next decade. Keep Sedona Beautiful is actively participating in the process, having submitted a detailed document laying out key priorities. We have also administered a set of surveys covering the various topical areas of the plan and will submit the results to Yavapai County, demonstrating the priorities of residents who took the surveys. We will closely evaluate draft elements of the plan and work to see that the approved plan protects the environment and natural beauty of Yavapai County.

KSB contributed to the creation of the Sedona Sustainable Tourism Plan and is the lead partner for implementing four of the plan's key tactics:

1. To encourage less consumption of single use plastics
2. To advocate that development of private/public lands is in alignment with sustainability goals
3. To encourage grandfathered businesses and residents to implement dark sky-compliant lighting
4. To encourage businesses and residents to eliminate the use of pesticides and other chemical products that may negatively impact the environment

We also vigorously supported the City of Sedona Climate Action Plan adopted in 2021.

We merged with both Save our Ancient Red Rocks (SOAR) and with the Verde Valley Land Preservation Institute (VVLPI), creating a more effective voice advocating for land preservation and protection of public lands. Through SOAR, we sponsored the 2019 Northern Arizona Environmental Conference that brought around 150 environmentalists from 45 organizations together to coordinate activity and initiatives. KSB was a sponsor of VVLPI's Town Hall Forum on land use, in coordination with Arizona Town Hall, which explored pressing land issues impacting the area and was attended by over 200 environmental and sustainability leaders, builders, land developers, political appointees and elected officials.

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The exponential increase in Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) rentals and use has triggered nothing short of a crisis on Forest Service land northwest of Sedona and in the Chapel neighborhood where the Broken Arrow OHV trail starts. Reckless and inconsiderate drivers are disrupting the peace of neighborhoods, destroying pristine land, endangering the safety of others and themselves and raising clouds of dust that harm both vegetation and local residents. We are working in conjunction with residents, the Forest Service, the City of Sedona, Yavapai County and OHV rental operators to bring this devastating situation under control.

We're featuring articles on this and other important topics in our Quarterly Newsletter, Preserving the Wonder™. Recent issues have focused on sustainability, climate change, protecting your residence from wildfires and the threat posed by overuse of plastics. We've also started a regular column drawing attention to the positive advances in these areas, the "Good News".

An important contributing factor in our continuing success has been the generous financial support KSB receives from individual donors and the business community. We're grateful for their commitment to our mission. Another factor has been the time that our volunteers and Board members contribute.

In 2012, KSB created an Endowment Fund to help ensure that KSB survives and thrives through a significant economic downturn. In 2021 we chose to move the Endowment Fund to the Socially Responsible Pool managed by the Arizona Community Foundation. This move reflects our commitment to live up to our mission. Among other exclusions, the Socially Responsible Pool includes no investments in the fossil fuel, tobacco or weapons industries.

Most recently, we updated and simplified our mission statement. The mission of Keep Sedona Beautiful is *"To protect and enhance the scenic beauty and natural environment of Sedona and the Verde Valley."*

For our efforts in our 5th decade of service, Arizona Forward gave us their 2014 Award of Merit for Environmental Stewardship in Northern Arizona. In 2015 KSB won the International Dark Sky Association's Dark Sky Defender Award and, in 2016, Mike Yarbrough from KSB was recognized for his crucial work that eventually resulted in the voluntary noise abatement agreement limiting helicopter noise.

The Future

While it's remarkable what the volunteers at Keep Sedona Beautiful have been able to accomplish over the past 50 years, we believe that our most important work lies ahead.

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With the ever-increasing popularity of the Verde Valley as a tourist destination, more visitors spend time here, resulting in more litter. Our litter lifters will be even more important in the coming years.

The Verde Valley is seeing a similar increase in the number of large-scale development proposals. We view it as our responsibility to object to inappropriate development while supporting responsible development. For example, due to skyrocketing home prices coupled with the State of Arizona's horrific decision to prevent municipalities from regulating short-term rentals, the Verde Valley is facing a significant shortage of workforce housing. We look forward to lending our strong support to responsible development proposals aimed at addressing the shortage in workforce and affordable housing.

The Yavapai County Comprehensive Plan must be updated to reflect protection of our environment rather than the historical emphasis solely on development. We feel that the environment is our economy and that responsible and measured growth can coexist with environmental protections. These updates occur every 10 years, and KSB will be a key player each time.

A similar effort will take place as incorporated communities in the Verde Valley update their Community Plans every 10 years and as the Forest Service updates its Management Plan.

We intend to fight any time a vested interest proposes privatizing our public land. This is non-negotiable for KSB. Public land cannot be sold off to business interests.

We expect climate change to take on more urgency each passing year. While it may not seem that one individual can have a measurable impact, the collective actions and voices of hundreds, then thousands and finally millions will be felt and heard. Each voice in a chorus is equally important. We intend to enlist members of that chorus.

The stark reality of our current mega-drought brings home the absolute imperative to conserve our ground and surface water resources and to ensure the quality of that water. Both Yavapai and Coconino Counties must make the long-term availability of water a primary determinant when considering new development proposals. Keep Sedona Beautiful will work relentlessly to ensure that our water is protected.

We're living through a time of incredible change, in the climate, in technology and in social norms. To meet the challenges of our times, we need to recognize the hard realities facing us. We need to embrace emerging technologies that will address those realities: renewable energy, electric vehicles, regenerative agriculture, diversified and super-efficient housing and more.

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Finally, we must meet these challenges with a spirit of community and civility. The time for acrimony has passed. It's now time to work together to solve our common problems and to build a future that we can be proud to pass on to our children and grandchildren.

Those children and grandchildren will be the future leaders keeping Sedona and the Verde Valley beautiful.