

Phoenix Pride Community Town Hall Recap – January 22, 2026

Introduction

Before you dive in, we want to name that this recap is intentionally long and detailed. The Community Town Hall covered a wide range of topics, many of them layered and complex, and we felt it was important to capture that depth rather than oversimplify it. Our goal with this recap is to offer transparency, context, and clarity, and to reflect both the questions raised and the nuance behind the answers shared. While it may take a few minutes to read, we hope it helps provide a fuller picture of where Phoenix Pride is, how decisions are made, and where we are headed together.

Phoenix Pride announced the Community Town Hall in November, and as scheduled at that time, it took place on January 22 at the Parsons Center in Downtown Phoenix. The goal was to create space for open dialogue, share context around how the organization operates, and respond directly to the questions and concerns we've heard from our community. This gathering was rooted in a simple intention. To listen. To clarify. To build trust. And to move forward together.

Event Summary

Approximately 40 community members attended in person, with peak livestream viewership reaching 46 people during the event. Since then, the livestream recording on Facebook has continued to reach a much broader audience, with more than 7,200 views at the time of preparing this recap. More than 250 community members also participated in the survey leading up to the Town Hall, helping shape the questions and priorities for the discussion. What followed was thoughtful, candid, and at times emotional. These conversations are not always easy, and this recap is not intended to answer every single question or resolve every concern. Instead, it represents a moment of transparency, reflection, and accountability, and a commitment to ongoing dialogue rather than a final conclusion.

Common Themes

One of the strongest themes throughout the Town Hall, based on survey feedback, was a desire for greater transparency, clearer communication, and broader involvement in how decisions are made. Many community members shared that they often see the outcomes of decisions without fully understanding the context, constraints, or reasoning behind them. We heard clearly that people are not simply looking for answers. They are looking for understanding, and they want to know that a diversity of voices and lived experiences are part of shaping those decisions. Phoenix Pride acknowledged that while we strive to act in the best interest of our community, we have not always done enough to explain the why behind our choices or to consistently create real ways for people to be involved.

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At the same time, the reality of nonprofit work is that decisions are shaped by the people who are able to step forward, commit time, and help carry the work. While Phoenix Pride's board process is intentionally designed to be welcoming and accessible, we recognize that the time commitment and responsibility required for board service can still feel out of reach for many people. Because of that, our focus moving forward is not on changing how governance works, but on creating additional ways for community members to engage, contribute, and help shape decisions without the long-term time commitment that board service requires.

The idea for roundtable advisory committees came out of internal reflection and conversations following the community survey responses. They are not predetermined or permanent. Instead, they will only be created if the community feels they are necessary, and their focus areas will be shaped directly by community feedback. These groups are designed to offer short-term, issue-focused opportunities for participation that fit a wider range of schedules, capacities, and life realities. They will be time-specific, created around clearly defined topics, and built to allow people to meaningfully contribute without committing to ongoing service.

Moving forward, we are committing to more consistent, proactive communication and deeper community involvement through our weekly newsletter, social media, surveys, advisory groups, and engagement opportunities, so that decisions are informed by collaboration, shared responsibility, and lived experience.

Key Concerns

Questions about leadership, board makeup, and representation came from a real desire to understand how decisions are made and who gets to be part of shaping them. Phoenix Pride operates through a combination of board governance, staff leadership, and community-led committee work, designed to balance financial oversight, long-term planning, and community voice. Phoenix Pride can have up to 17 board members, and right now, we have five active directors. Serving on the Board is a meaningful but demanding commitment that includes monthly meetings, committee service, governance responsibilities, and regular community engagement. In late 2024, Phoenix Pride issued a broad public call for board members and intentionally bypassed some of our usual entry requirements to increase accessibility. More than 50 people expressed interest, and each individual received personal outreach. While this resulted in one of the most diverse boards the organization has had in years, many of those new members ultimately stepped away within a few months due to the time, and responsibility involved in board service. Recruitment remains ongoing, with a focus on building leadership that reflects the diversity, lived experience, and values of our community.

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Much of Phoenix Pride's work also happens through standing committees, which provide real ways for community members to engage, lead, and help shape the organization's direction. These include the Audit Committee, Governance Committee, Finance and Budget Committee, Education and Outreach Committee, Fund Development Committee, and the Law Enforcement Advisory Committee. These groups support everything from financial oversight and compliance to programming, fundraising, community outreach, and safety planning, and they play a critical role in ensuring that Phoenix Pride's decisions are informed, accountable, and grounded in community needs.

Community members also expressed a strong desire to see Phoenix Pride continue expanding its impact beyond Pride weekend, and to better understand what happens throughout the year. One of the areas where we need support and partnership is understanding how people actually learn about our events. Currently, Phoenix Pride promotes all programming through social media and our weekly newsletter, yet consistent feedback tells us that many people don't hear about events until the last minute, or sometimes after the event has already passed. That tells us that while we are communicating, we are not always reaching people in the ways that work best for them. In the back half of 2025, we began experimenting with additional platforms, including Eventbrite, and have already seen some success. Still, this area needs continued focus, refinement, and community input so we can better understand where and how our community prefers to receive information.

Beyond our major annual events, including the festivals, parade, pageants, awards reception, and Community Unity 5K, Phoenix Pride hosted 15 additional events in 2025. These ranged widely in format and audience, including Pride Nights with local sports teams, our second annual Mental Health Fair, a Betty Who concert in partnership with iHeartRadio, a community talent show at Esso Coffeehouse, a Pride Prom, and other pop-up community events. These efforts reflect our broader commitment to accessibility, inclusion, and year-round engagement. Our Pride festivals happen two weekends a year, but the work of Phoenix Pride, and the work of building community, happens all year long.

Questions about how entertainers are selected and compensated centered on fairness, respect, and valuing community labor. All entertainers, excluding national headliners, apply through an open process and are given the opportunity to request compensation or choose to donate their time. Only performers who explicitly indicate on their application that they wish to donate their time are booked without compensation. No performer who requests payment is asked to work for free, and Phoenix Pride makes every effort to honor full compensation requests whenever possible. We build our entertainment lineups thoughtfully, with care for representation, diversity, and fair compensation.

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One of the most complex and emotionally layered discussions centered on event safety and security, particularly the presence of law enforcement. We want to begin by acknowledging that police presence means very different things to different people. For some, it represents safety and reassurance. For others, it is tied to lived experiences of harm, fear, trauma, or exclusion. In nearly every community survey Phoenix Pride has conducted on this topic, responses have consistently split almost exactly 50/50, reflecting the complexity of this issue and the deeply personal nature of how people experience safety. We know this is complicated, and we want to hold space around this topic with care.

At the same time, Phoenix Pride operates within a legal and regulatory framework that shapes how public events must be planned. When planning large-scale public events, Phoenix Pride is required to include off-duty law enforcement officers as part of our overall safety plan. This is not a discretionary choice. It is a legal requirement under City of Phoenix permitting rules, Arizona liquor licensing laws, public safety regulations, and insurance policies. Without meeting these requirements, Phoenix Pride cannot legally hold large-scale public events. These officers are hired in an off-duty capacity as part of our required safety plan, and their presence is one of the many necessary costs of producing large-scale community events.

In addition to this required presence, Phoenix Pride supplements security with private security teams, creating layered safety planning that centers the community, prioritizes de-escalation, crowd support, medical coordination, and harm reduction. Safety planning for events of this scale is complex, particularly at a time when LGBTQ+ communities across the country are facing increased hostility, political extremism, and real threats of violence. In the weeks leading up to the festival, we heard directly from community members who were deeply concerned about their safety, and those fears shaped how we approached our planning.

Phoenix Pride develops safety strategies in coordination with multiple agencies, including the City of Phoenix, Phoenix Police Department, Phoenix Fire Department, Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, the Homeland Defense Bureau within the Phoenix Police Department's Strategic and Tactical Services Division, the FBI, and our private security partner. This coordination focuses on threat prevention, emergency preparedness, and large-scale event safety planning. Important to note, Phoenix Pride always works directly with the Phoenix Police Department off-duty coordinator, who happens to be a member of the community, to select which officers staff our events, selecting officers who are members of the LGBTQ+ community and allies. These officers are present primarily for event security and emergency response, and they do not operate independently or make unilateral decisions such as arrests without the involvement and direction of Phoenix Pride's Executive Director and event leadership.

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This structure exists to minimize unnecessary law enforcement interaction while maintaining safety, accountability, and compliance. This is also why Phoenix Pride maintains a Law Enforcement Advisory Committee, which exists to guide conversations, policies, and expectations around how law enforcement interacts with our community and is open to any community member who would like to help shape that dialogue.

Another significant area of concern centered on political participation at Phoenix Pride events. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Phoenix Pride is legally required to operate in a nonpartisan manner, which means we cannot exclude individuals or organizations solely based on political affiliation when participation is allowed more broadly. Our participation standards are instead based on how people show up, treat others, and impact the community, not political labels. All exhibitors, sponsors, partners, and attendees are required to adhere to strict codes of conduct and community standards designed to protect the safety, dignity, and wellbeing of our community. With tens of thousands of people attending our festival, Phoenix Pride cannot see every interaction or moment across a multi-day, multi-acre event. This is why community feedback is essential. When behavior or messaging violates our standards, we rely on community members to bring those concerns directly to our attention so they can be addressed appropriately.

It's also important to name that Phoenix Pride is not alone in navigating this moment. Pride organizations across the country are facing rising costs, shrinking sponsorship budgets, changes in corporate giving strategies, and the tightening or loss of traditional funding sources. These pressures are reshaping how LGBTQ+ organizations operate, fundraise, and plan for sustainability nationwide.

At the same time, Phoenix Pride enters this moment from a position of active governance, financial oversight, and organizational transparency. Our financial records are current and publicly available, our audits and tax filings are up to date, and our Board and staff are actively engaged in addressing challenges head-on. While the work ahead is real and requires adjustment, planning, and community partnership, Phoenix Pride remains a healthy, functioning organization that is committed to accountability, sustainability, and long-term stability.

One of the most important and difficult questions raised during the Town Hall was why Phoenix Pride experienced such a significant deficit and what is being done to close it. The honest answer begins with understanding how dramatically the cost of doing business has changed since COVID. Across nearly every category, from staging and fencing to security, insurance, labor, equipment, permits, and logistics, costs have in many cases tripled or more. At the same time, corporate sponsorship landscapes have shifted, discretionary spending has tightened, and community members are facing financial strain of their own.

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In 2021, coming back to in person events, our festival was record-setting. In 2022, extreme rain significantly impacted attendance and revenue. In 2023, record-breaking heat again affected turnout. By 2024, we began to see clearer signals that the landscape itself was changing. Going into 2025, Phoenix Pride made the decision to cut the festival budget by more than 25 percent. At the same time, community feedback told us that the festival layout felt dated and in need of refresh, and within those reductions, we reimagined the festival's appearance and flow while still reducing costs.

After the event, we saw clearly that those cuts, while significant, were not enough. The organizational deficit we are now facing came almost entirely from this single event. All other Phoenix Pride events and programs met their planned financial outcomes. Nearly eight years ago, community feedback told us that our festival felt not enough for a city of our size. At that time, growth felt like the right response. Today, in a very different cultural, political, and economic moment, we recognize the need to shift direction. That means intentionally moving toward smaller, more grassroots, more community-centered programming, prioritizing sustainability, accessibility, and meaningful impact over scale, and aligning the scope of our events with our mission as an events-based organization that supports the community through our Community Foundation and giveback programs. None of these decisions are easy, and we carry the weight of them seriously.

Looking Forward

For 2026, Phoenix Pride has made additional significant budget reductions and structural adjustments. The Board of Directors has passed a balanced operating budget, and staff are now tasked with operating fully within that framework. This year's festival will reflect these changes, with thoughtful shifts in scale, layout, and approach designed to protect the long-term health of the organization.

Phoenix Pride has always been built by its community. This moment is no different. As we navigate financial realities, organizational growth, and evolving community needs, we need more people at the table. Not just as attendees, but as leaders, advisors, volunteers, and collaborators. There are many meaningful ways to get involved, including board service, volunteer committees, advisory committees, and upcoming opportunities for community feedback. In the coming weeks, Phoenix Pride will release a short community survey focused on engagement, representation, communication, and trust, and we encourage everyone to participate.

Our future is something we build together. Through dialogue, accountability, care, and shared responsibility, we can continue shaping Phoenix Pride into an organization that reflects the full strength, diversity, and resilience of our community. Thank you to everyone who showed up, spoke honestly, listened deeply, and continues to believe in not only what Phoenix Pride is, but what we can be together. We look forward to many more conversations like this in the future.

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