Phoenix area cities have long sought to grow 4-year universities. What has been Surprise's secret with the growing Ottawa University?

A view of Founders Hall, of the first buildings to be constructed on the campus, at Ottawa University in Surprise on Aug. 21, 2021. *Monica D. Spencer/The Republic*

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Thirty miles northwest of Phoenix, there's a square mile of largely vacant scrub-covered desert amid a rapidly growing city of 143,000 residents.

The vast dirt plots are a striking contrast to the bustling Bell Road to the north, where traffic steams past strip malls with big-box stores, chain retailers, fast food drive-thrus and restaurants.

But in the middle of the dirt square, a 200-acre stretch of buildings, sports fields and swimming pools have etched their way into a bell-shaped formation. Most of the structures, beige with burnt orange accents, belong to the city of Surprise.

A small subset of four buildings and one football field, however, do not. Those buildings, on the southeastern edge, make up Ottawa University: a private, 4-year Christian university with 900 students.

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For some Surprise residents, it's become a staple. Those who live closest know when the football games are because of the bright stadium lights.

"You can definitely tell they're trying to make a little college town," said Stacy Jones, whose son, Elijah, attended the school for a year. "You definitely see it (with) the students walking to and from their dorms."

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Area high school students who dream of playing college ball but don't make the cut at Arizona State University or the University of Arizona and don't want to leave home can often find themselves a place there.

It's not a bad deal considering Ottawa's team made the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Football Championship Series in 2019.

But other Surprise residents are less familiar with the school. Mark Lackowski lives nearby and his son will attend on a football scholarship this fall.

Students walk from Founders Hall to the student union at Ottawa University in Surprise on Aug. 21, 2021. *Monica D. Spencer/The Republic*

Lackowski said he and his neighbors first mistook it for a trade school, and didn't realize it was a full-fledged campus until his wife, who works at an apartment complex, met students who attended.

In other cities, like Phoenix, some have never heard of Ottawa and never knew Surprise had a college at all.

Ottawa opened its residential campus in Surprise in 2017. Then, and still now, it was a big get for the suburban city.

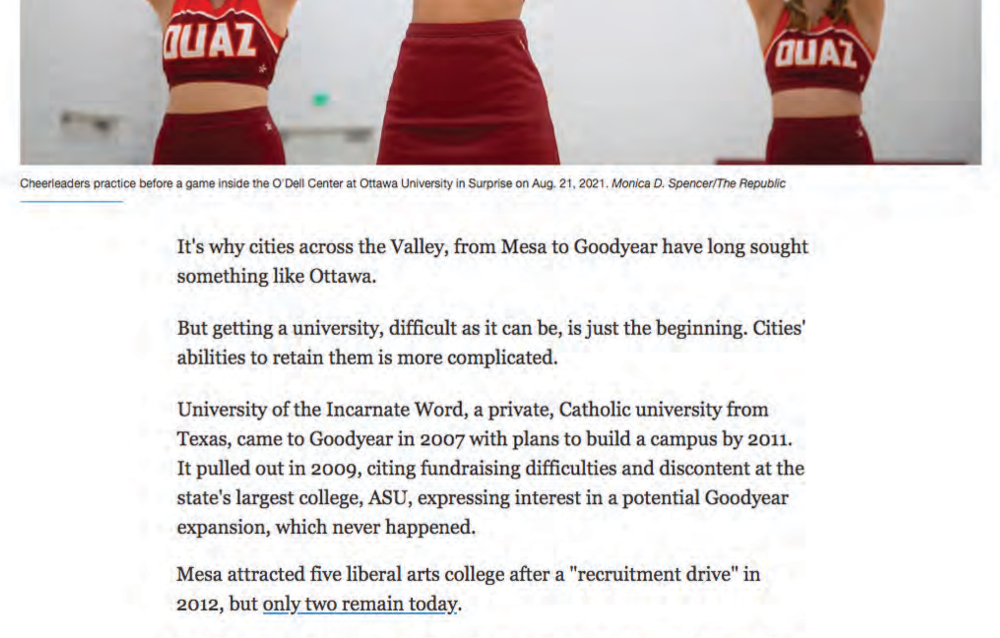
Colleges spell out multiple advantages, city economic developers say.

The students and visiting parents spend money that generates sales tax revenue for cities. Restaurants and retailers often follow to capitalize on that, meaning more one-time city fees and ongoing taxes.

The colleges also attract big employers looking for an educated workforce.

"We look at (Ottawa) as a partner in the attraction and retention of corporate investment in the city," Surprise Economic Development Director Mike Hoover told The Arizona Republic.

Plus, city leaders say a college can band a community together, give the residents a sense of collective identity, provide space for communal gatherings and excitement.



Cheerleaders practice before a game inside the O'Dell Center at Ottawa University in Surprise on Aug. 21, 2021. *Monica D. Spencer/The Republic*

It's why cities across the Valley, from Mesa to Goodyear have long sought something like Ottawa.

But getting a university, difficult as it can be, is just the beginning. Cities' abilities to retain them is more complicated.

University of the Incarnate Word, a private, Catholic university from Texas, came to Goodyear in 2007 with plans to build a campus by 2011. It pulled out in 2009, citing fundraising difficulties and discontent at the state's largest college, ASU, expressing interest in a potential Goodyear expansion, which never happened.

Mesa attracted five liberal arts college after a "recruitment drive" in 2012, but only two remain today.

Gilbert lost Saint Xavier University just a year after the Catholic college from Chicago moved into the town's newly constructed, $37 million taxpayer-funded building. Officials from the university cited budget issues.

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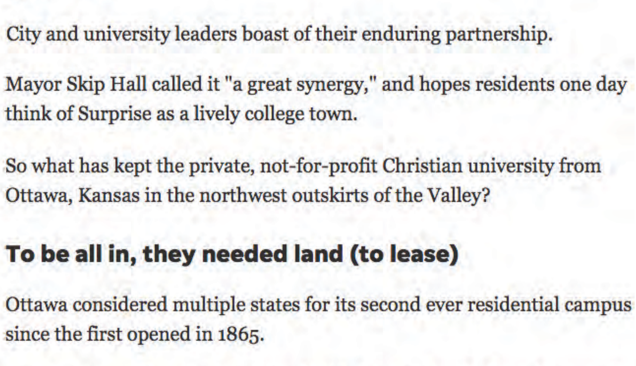


But four years after the Kansas-based, nonprofit Ottawa University opened its second ever residential campus, the Surprise campus enrollment has grown 112%.

City and university leaders boast of their enduring partnership.

Mayor Skip Hall called it "a great synergy," and hopes residents one day think of Surprise as a lively college town.

So what has kept the private, not-for-profit Christian university from Ottawa, Kansas in the northwest outskirts of the Valley?

To be all in, they needed land (to lease)

Ottawa considered multiple states for its second ever residential campus since the first opened in 1865.

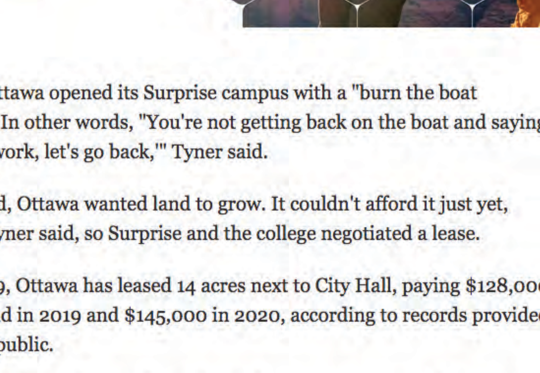
University President Dennis Tyner said Ottawa chose Arizona because of its growing population and lack of higher education options.

Ottawa University president Dennis Tyner talks about his school at Ottawa University in Surprise on June 23. *Joseph Cooke/The Republic*

Most people can only name Arizona's three state universities and Grand Canyon University, Tyner said. Ottawa leaders saw that as an opportunity.

Surprise was selected because of that vast undeveloped land. Ottawa officials knew they wanted to go all in, which required space.

Most schools looking to expand into the Valley come with a couple majors and a couple sports but this "dip our toe in the water" approach doesn't work because students want the entire college experience, Tyner told The Republic.



He said Ottawa opened its Surprise campus with a "burn the boat mindset." In other words, "You're not getting back on the boat and saying, 'It didn't work, let's go back,'" Tyner said.

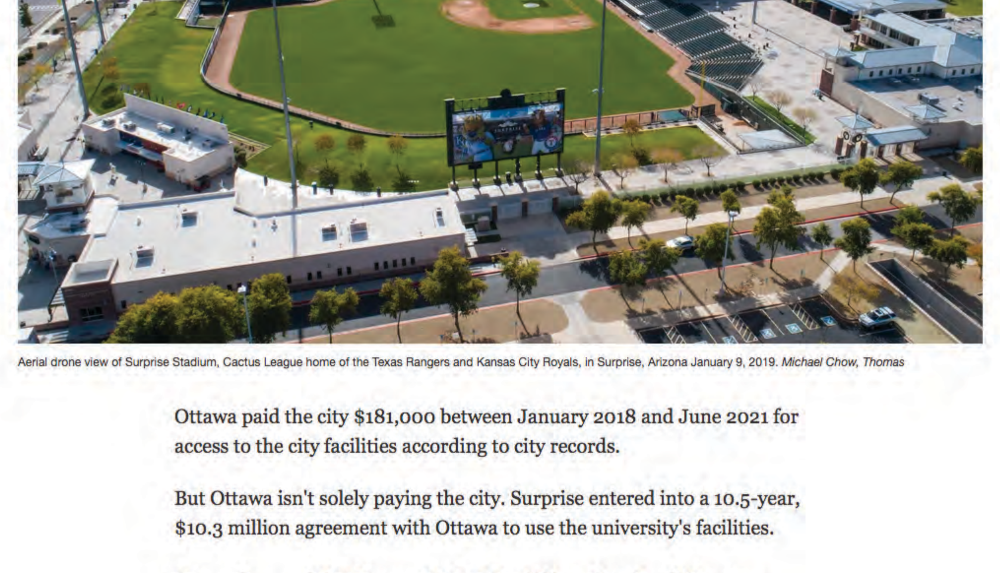
To succeed, Ottawa wanted land to grow. It couldn't afford it just yet, though, Tyner said, so Surprise and the college negotiated a lease.

Since 2019, Ottawa has leased 14 acres next to City Hall, paying $128,000 for the land in 2019 and $145,000 in 2020, according to records provided to The Republic.

Surprise also gave Ottawa the option to lease a 2-acre parcel between years three and 20 of the 65-year lease and a 22-acre parcel by 2024. During that time, Surprise won't lease the land to anyone else, according to the agreement.

Ottawa can purchase any of the land it leases, too. Tyner said the university has plans to do so, but hasn't had the financing yet.

For amenities the university doesn't offer, Surprise gives Ottawa students access to more city-owned property, including the city's tennis courts, swimming pools, baseball fields and Surprise Stadium where the Kansas City Royals and Texas Rangers play during spring training.


Aerial drone view of Surprise Stadium, Cactus League home of the Texas Rangers and Kansas City Royals, in Surprise, Arizona January 9, 2019. *Michael Chow, Thomas*

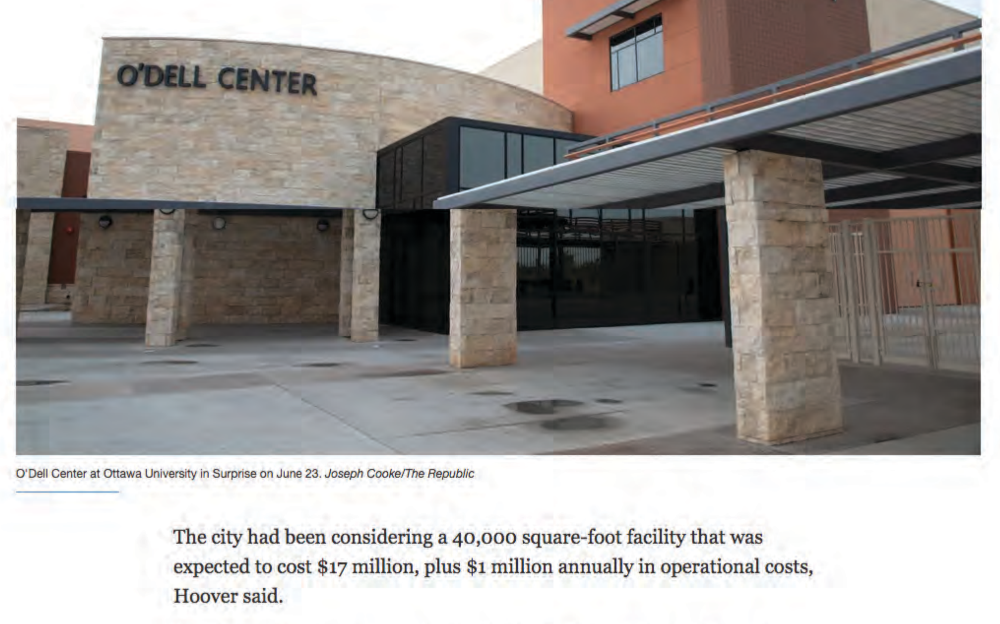
Ottawa paid the city $181,000 between January 2018 and June 2021 for access to the city facilities according to city records.

But Ottawa isn't solely paying the city. Surprise entered into a 10.5-year, $10.3 million agreement with Ottawa to use the university's facilities.

Surprise paid Ottawa $10.14 million for facility use

In 2018, the Surprise City Council voted to pay Ottawa $1 million per year for 10 years to use Ottawa's sports fields, fitness studios, gyms and conference rooms.

Hoover told the council then the lease agreement was a good deal because the city needed the space, mostly for its parks and recreation programming, but now wouldn't have to build it.



O'Dell Center at Ottawa University in Surprise on June 23. *Joseph Cooke/The Republic*

The city had been considering a 40,000 square-foot facility that was expected to cost $17 million, plus $1 million annually in operational costs, Hoover said.

The Ottawa facilities, except for the football field and one building where classes and administrative offices were housed, hadn't been built yet.

But as part of the agreement, the university agreed to include certain amenities, such as an indoor walking track in the gym, adjustable basketball hoops for youth sports and half off gym memberships for city residents.

Ottawa University volleyball player Matt Beard hits the ball as his teammate Chris Nero watches him at a gym at Ottawa University in Surprise on June 23. *Joseph Cooke/The Republic*

The city paid for the first five years, a $5 million payment, up front. The university needed that money, combined with a private $6 million donation, to build its sports facility, the O'Dell Center.

Surprise also waived $142,000 in certain development fees for some of the city access to university facilities.

Renting the university's space instead of building its own brought the city construction sales tax and development fee revenue, city officials said at the time. Ottawa paid Surprise $750,000 in development fees alone to construct a residence hall, classroom and cafeteria building, and sports facility, according to city records.

Surprise officials also considered indirect benefits. If Ottawa came in, the city would be relieved of a multi-million dollar financial obligation with Maricopa County Community Colleges District.

The city had signed an agreement with MCCCD years prior related to the failed "communiversity" partnership.

The "communiversity" was an East coast concept to bring a "community of universities" together in one shared space so that students could take classes from multiple institutions to quickly attain a degree.

Surprise's Communiversity, next to City Hall, was billed as a way to spearhead recovery from the Great Recession, then-Mayor Lynn Truitt said.

The concept struggled just seven months after opening in 2009. Two 4-year university partners, University of the Incarnate Word and Western International University, left by 2011, citing inadequate student enrollment.

In 2018, Surprise was facing the obligation to purchase the communiversity building back from MCCCD. City officials estimated the cost somewhere between $6 and $8 million.

Surprise's Communiversity was billed as a one-stop shop for adults to quickly and easily finish their degrees. Just months after opening, however, the concept was struggling to garner name recognition and sufficient enrollment. *The Arizona Republic Archives*

At the same time, Ottawa was leasing the building from MCCCD and considering purchasing it.

If the City Council helped Ottawa build the remainder of its residential campus in the form of a facilities use agreement with that $5 million upfront payment, Ottawa would stay in Surprise and purchase the communiversity building, unlocking Surprise from its contractual obligation with MCCCD.

The council inked the agreement with Ottawa on Oct. 18, 2018.

Hoover said the agreement was "classic good city planning," and that it would serve as a "case study" for the city.

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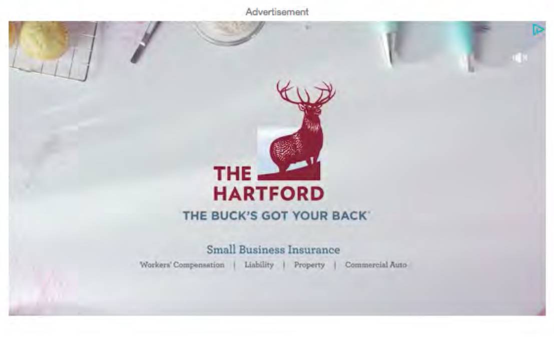


"We can grow our programing over the next 10 years and then we can make an informed decision on what's best for that programming into the future," he told The Republic.

The mayor said the city "worked hard to ensure there was no gift clause conflict" — a state law that bars municipalities from giving money to private companies without an equal benefit to taxpayers.

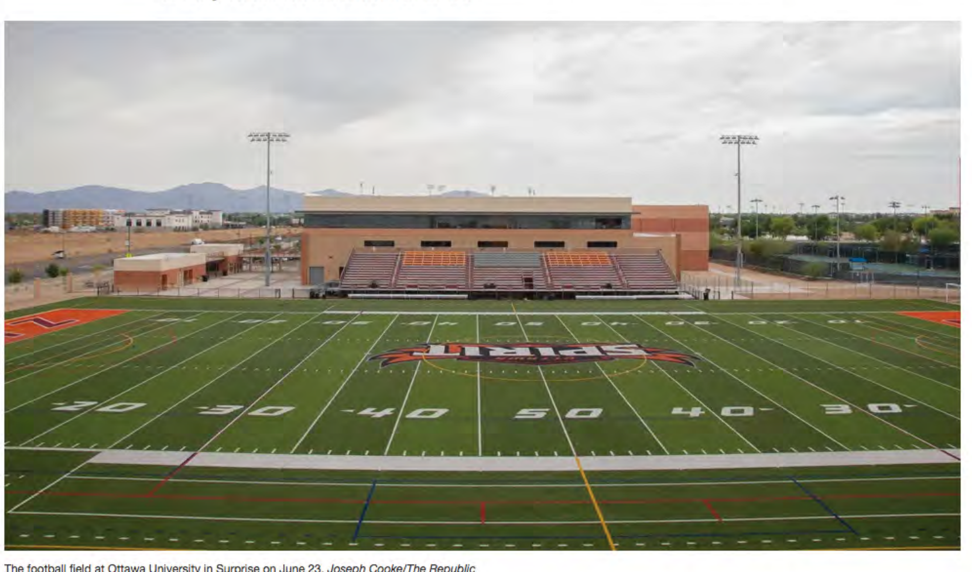
"We had to look at it like, 'How would organizations like Goldwater Institute look at this?' We had to check ourselves and go through that mental exercise."

The Phoenix-based conservative think tank sued Peoria in 2016 for its use of subsidies to lure the private, Indiana-based Huntington University to the city's dining and entertainment district, P83.

The Arizona Supreme Court ruled against Peoria in 2021.

Sports seen as key to success for both school and city

With land and financing secured, Ottawa school leaders viewed sports as the key to boost student enrollment.


The football field at Ottawa University in Surprise on June 23. *Joseph Cooke/The Republic*

The residential campus opened in August 2017 with Founders Hall (the former communiversity building) and Spirit Field, a 97,000 square-foot football field that opened in October.

The dormitories, a student union with classrooms and a cafeteria and the sports facility didn't open to students until spring 2020.

To persuade students to enroll at a campus that largely existed just on blueprints, Ottawa focused on sports, Tyner said.

The reasons were myriad. Athletes were willing to be "pioneers" at a largely unknown new school, Tyner said. It also gave a chance to students who had dreams of playing sports in college but didn't want to travel out of state and hadn't made other Arizona schools' teams.

Focusing on sports guaranteed "critical mass," Tyner said. Ottawa needed enough athletes to fill the teams.

Ottawa hired Mike Nesbitt from West Texas A&M and Mike Bethea from Texas Christian University to coach the school's football team.

The school reported enrollment of 434 students its first year.

"Of those 434 students, only nine were not varsity athletes," Tyner told The Republic. About half were from out of state.

With no dorm yet, the university housed "on-campus" students in nearby apartments and bussed them to classes. The school cooked food out of a trailer, then brought that food to a classroom it used temporarily for dining, Ottawa Chancellor Emeritus Kevin Eichner said. "It was no place for the faint of heart," he said.

Ottawa University president Dennis Tyner and Ottawa University tennis head coach Brad Louderback have a conversation at Ottawa University in Surprise on June 23. Joseph Cooke/The Republic

But with that, city leaders began to see what they had hoped for. Students living in an area where leaders have tried profusely to spur development.

Sports would also bring excitement to the community of 143,000 residents and put Surprise on the map as a growing, established city.

"We as a council have long envisioned having a university here on this campus that would help us build a sense of 'there.' A sense of arrival, a sense of creating that space that identifies with who we are as a city," former Mayor Sharon Wolcott said in 2018. "This is really just a dream come true."

Four years later, Hall said that sense of place continues to grow, and that he looks forward to working with Ottawa to expand their presence.

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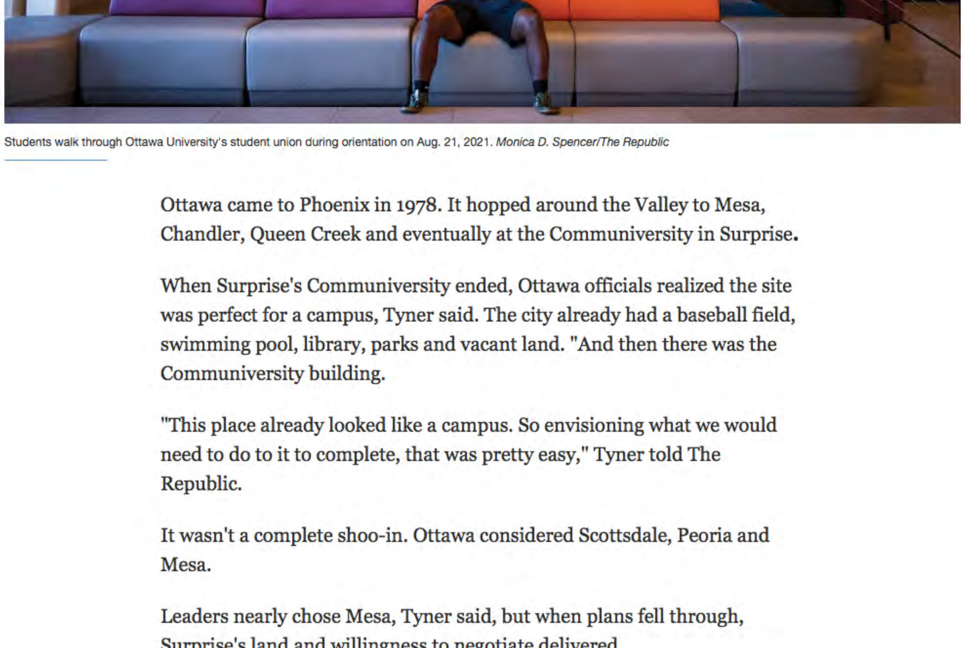
The start of a campus already existed

The fact that Surprise's land already resembled a college campus attracted Ottawa officials, Tyner told The Republic.

While some of thethree community colleges and three universities involved in the Communiversity struggled to attract enough students, Ottawa held a third of the partnership's in-person enrollment in 2010, The Republic reported.

The school had slowly been building its reputation in the Valley for four decades.

Former Ottawa president Peter Armacost first decided to expand the college in 1972 with "adult sites" where those who started but never finished college could get their degrees. The sites, first in Kansas City, then Phoenix, Milwaukee, Jefferson and eventually overseas, weren't complete college campuses, just buildings with a few classrooms.


Students walk through Ottawa University's student union during orientation on Aug. 21, 2021. *Monica D. Spencer/The Republic*

Ottawa came to Phoenix in 1978. It hopped around the Valley to Mesa, Chandler, Queen Creek and eventually at the Communiversity in Surprise.

When Surprise's Communiversity ended, Ottawa officials realized the site was perfect for a campus, Tyner said. The city already had a baseball field, swimming pool, library, parks and vacant land. "And then there was the Communiversity building.

"This place already looked like a campus. So envisioning what we would need to do to it to complete, that was pretty easy," Tyner told The Republic.

It wasn't a complete shoo-in. Ottawa considered Scottsdale, Peoria and Mesa.

Leaders nearly chose Mesa, Tyner said, but when plans fell through, Surprise's land and willingness to negotiate delivered.

It helped that Surprise was shopping for colleges, too.

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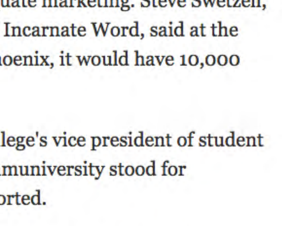


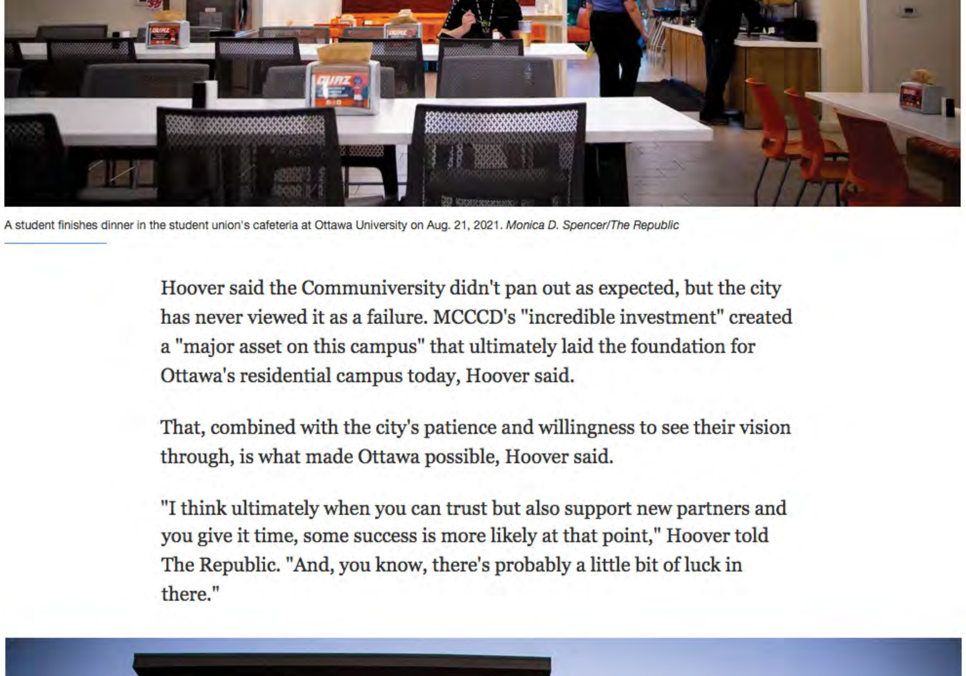
Patience and 'a little bit of luck'

The Communiversity didn't hurtle Surprise residents out of the Great Recession, nor did it jumpstart substantial area development as city leaders hoped.

Most stakeholders involved in the concept chalked up its failure to its location so far outside Phoenix and inadequate marketing. Steve Swetzell, director of operations for University of the Incarnate Word, said at the time if it had been located in downtown Phoenix, it would have 10,000 students instead of 1,000 students.

Alberto Sanchez, Glendale Community College's vice president of student affairs, said one GCC student thought Communiversity stood for "communist university," The Republic reported.

Still, the Surprise City Council and staffers pressed for more higher education options. The city outlined its commitment in a 2011 strategic plan, then readopted the plan in 2013.


A student finishes dinner in the student union's cafeteria at Ottawa University on Aug. 21, 2021. *Monica D. Spencer/The Republic*

Hoover said the Communiversity didn't pan out as expected, but the city has never viewed it as a failure. MCCCD's "incredible investment" created a "major asset on this campus" that ultimately laid the foundation for Ottawa's residential campus today, Hoover said.

That, combined with the city's patience and willingness to see their vision through, is what made Ottawa possible, Hoover said.

"I think ultimately when you can trust but also support new partners and you give it time, some success is more likely at that point," Hoover told The Republic. "And, you know, there's probably a little bit of luck in there."

A woman walks a dog past Scholars Hall at Ottawa University in Surprise on Aug. 21, 2021. *Monica D. Spencer/The Republic*

What's next for Ottawa

Ottawa students began returning to campus for the fall semester over the weekend. Classes began Monday with 920 students.

It's not as high as Ottawa would like, Tyner said. The pandemic has likely stifled some of the university's growth, he added.

The school's goal is 3,000 on-campus students in the next eight to 10 years, Eichner said.

Ottawa is exploring options to add another dorm, Tyner said.

The campus currently includes four buildings and a football field: Founders Hall (the former Communiversity building), Student Union (classrooms and a cafeteria), Scholars Hall, the O'Dell Center and Spirit Field. The buildings add up to 162,000 square feet. The field is another 92,000 square feet.

Ottawa leaders have assembled mock plans for expansion, but it has no definitive deadline in mind. Maybe 10 years, he said.

Ottawa University leases 14 acres from Surprise, where it houses four buildings and a football field. The school also has the option to expand on 22 acres of city owned land in the future. *Courtesy Of Ottawa University*

Ottawa offers 19 degrees, with business administration and exercise science being its most popular, with 186 and 136 students enrolled respectively.

Tyner said he'd like the school to begin strengthening its academic reputation in addition to its athletic one. That starts with hiring more staff, not expanding degree offerings, he said.

Students athletes still make up 75% of the student body. That makes for a fun and determined school culture, but Ottawa shouldn't just be a place for sports, he told The Republic.

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