



## REIAC Southwest Fireside Chat: An Evening with John Graham

Drive around the Valley and chances are you will encounter a commercial development or residential community with the signature of Sunbelt Holdings on it.

Whether it's Marina Heights in Tempe, PV|303 in the West Valley, Portland on the Park in Downtown Phoenix, or Power Ranch in the East Valley, the common thread is Sunbelt Holdings. The driving force behind those projects: President and CEO John Graham.



“When it comes to developing a project, it takes more than money and a name; you also need leadership,” said Graham, the guest speaker for the 2018 REIAC Southwest Fireside Chat at Paradise Valley Country Club.

Graham joined Sunbelt Holdings in 1982 and became president in 1990. During that span he has overseen the

development of more than 55,000 acres of horizontal land and more than 10 million square feet of vertical development in four states, including Arizona.

But Graham's reach in the Valley goes beyond the development world. He is also a dominant force in the community. He is involved with or has been involved with more than 50 organizations in every position from chairman to board member to advisor.

With Steve Betts, Founder/President of Betts Real Estate Advisors, serving as moderator, Graham touched on numerous topics including Sunbelt's positioning as an urban developer to infrastructure to the state of education in Arizona.

Betts asked about the direction and focus of Sunbelt, which has been turning its attention to more urban developments.

“The metro area is growing more inward and upward,” Betts said. “Is the direction changing to more urban?”

“Yes, and, no,” Graham said. “Our roots started with the land component of development. We've been pretty good at that. There have been a couple of reasons we did a little bit of a switch. The economy was one. We kept thinking it would get better.

“We also looked at more infill properties. We bought the assets of Suncor (a development company that filed for Chapter 11 liquidation under bankruptcy in 2013). It was a more urban platform to do what we do from a land standpoint,” Graham said.

Graham said what Sunbelt saw happening in the suburbs was also happening in urban areas.

“There is placemaking, parks. It’s more complex, but the skill set is identical,” Graham said.

There have also been challenges, he said, and lots of learning curves.

“Our partners have all been great,” Graham said. “They have more acumen and strategy in the areas in which we are working in and bring something to the table.”

He mentioned Marina Heights as an example of a great partnership. The 2 MSF office complex on the bank of Tempe Town Lake was co-developed with Ryan Companies Inc. Portland on the Park is Sunbelt’s latest infill project. It was developed with Habitat Metro.



In looking back at Sunbelt’s prominent infill and suburban developments, Graham said the commonality was either partnering or collaborating with local government. Almost like a P3, he said.

“Having infrastructure in place helps to bring up the project and make it work,” Graham said. “It’s important to be able to

work in partnership with all government entities. What’s in their tool box that brings us together? Do we need a more robust tool box? Do we worry that it will run dry and can’t build the infrastructure we know we need?”

His thoughts on the state of K-12 education in Arizona?

“We have to get serious about it and serious about funding it,” Graham said. “Teachers are underpaid. Not \$10 million (dollars); it’s a ‘b’ (billion) dollar shortage. We have to get people’s attention and government needs to get creative.”

Graham’s role as a leader in the development community is rivaled only by his leadership when it comes to civic involvement. Betts joked that when it comes organizations in the Valley, Graham is the go-to person in town.

“There is value to me to be part of the community,” Graham said humbly. “Family, community, business. Those are mission critical to me. Making this a better community is important to me. And not just being engaged in a material way. But through leadership.”