Why I Founded the Canada Arizona Business Council

By Glenn Williamson

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Over two decades ago, after spending many years in Arizona as a Canadian, I saw something that needed attention - the substantial Canadian business community already here, like Canadian owned companies, investors, and executives who were building businesses, creating jobs, investing capital, and contributing to Arizona's economy. Yet many were operating independently, with limited awareness of one another or the opportunities they could pursue together.

I believed we needed to help ramp up talking about attracting new investment and help the Canadians who had already made Arizona their home. I wanted to find these people, understand their businesses, and connect them with others who could help them grow. That was the idea behind founding the Canada Arizona Business Council (CABC). Its purpose was to build a strong private-sector network that helps members develop relationships, identify opportunities, and do business.

The idea became real when I sat around the kitchen table at the Government of Canada's Official Residence in Los Angeles with then Canadian Consul General Colin Robertson. We shared a belief that Arizona deserved a stronger, deeper, direct connection to Canada. However, I knew that waiting for other organizations to make things happen would take time. I saw an opportunity to build something different - an organization driven by the private sector, built around trusted relationships, and focused on practical results. I took the initiative to launch the CABC and personally funded its early development because I believed the opportunity was worth pursuing. I wanted to start building those connections myself.

From the beginning, I wanted the CABC to be more than a series of meetings or an organization that talked about this relationship in general terms. I wanted to bring together people with the experience, relationships, capital, and decision-making authority to make things happen. One example was *Wings and Wheels*, a member-driven event at Scottsdale Airport the CABC put together that brought together hundreds aircraft owners, business leaders, Canadian high-net-worth snowbirds, and influential decision-makers in a more private setting. These were people who might not attend other types of meetings but who could create meaningful business opportunities at this event. It reinforced my belief that bringing the right people together in an environment could lead to real results.

I did not set out to create another type of organization that was already in existence. I wanted a practical, transaction-oriented business network. When a member needed an

introduction to a decision-maker, the CABC would help make that connection. Our success would be measured by what our members accomplished, not simply by the number of meetings we held.

As I researched the Canadian companies operating in Arizona, I realized how much activity was already here - and how difficult it could be to see the full picture. Canadian ownership and investment were not always obvious, and many relationships had developed quietly over the years. I came to believe that one of the CABC's greatest opportunities was to bring this to light and connect this established business community and help its members build on what they had already achieved.

My vision was not simply to identify Canadian companies that had made Arizona their home, but to help them expand. Many had established operations, tens of thousands of employees, and valuable local relationships. By bringing leaders together, we could help them expand. Rather than focusing exclusively on attracting new companies to Arizona (which we still do), I wanted the CABC to recognize and help the Canadian businesses already here grow and succeed.

I also recognized the potential among Canadian executives, entrepreneurs, and investors who maintained business operations in Canada, while spending significant time in Arizona. These individuals often had knowledge, relationships, and resources in both markets. Their connections could lead to new expanded operations. The CABC could help turn those existing personal and professional relationships into tangible commercial opportunities.

The same principle applies in the opposite direction. Arizona business owners with Canadian interests can use their established relationships to expand northward. A company does not always need to start from scratch in another market when it may already have a trusted contact, a potential partner, or a customer connection there.

This is what I believe makes the CABC different. We work with the businesses, investors, and individuals who already connect the two markets, helping them build on their existing relationships. This opportunity involves our role to help bring the right people together and move opportunities forward.

Having spent decades building relationships on both sides of the border, I felt I could contribute something useful. I had contacts and experience that could help people meet who might otherwise never connect. We developed a selective, senior-level network where participation and practical value matter more than simply building a large membership.

Over time, our work expanded into sectors such as infrastructure, water, energy, mining, manufacturing, aerospace, and aviation. I established the CABC Research Group because I believe research should do more than describe the Canada–Arizona relationship. It should help members identify companies, understand investment trends, and find opportunities they might use.

The CABC has also been involved in helping advance Canadian investment into Arizona worth many billions of dollars, particularly in critical sectors such as water and energy. These investments support the infrastructure needed for expanding fast-growing communities, advanced manufacturing, AI data centers, and other major industries. We can bring to the table banks, investors, pension funds (both equity and debt), and government partners. One of the things I came to recognize is that tourism, Canadian snowbirds, trade, and equity investment are not separate subjects. They are interconnected parts of the same economic relationship, and we need to treat them that way.

Tourism brings Canadians to Arizona. Snowbirds deepen their connection by spending extended periods here, becoming familiar with local communities, and building personal and professional relationships. Over time, those connections can lead to property purchases, business ventures, trade, partnerships, and investments in Arizona companies. What begins as a seasonal visit can develop into a lasting economic relationship.

The process works in both directions. Canadians who spend time in Arizona may have businesses and investment interests in Canada that can help Arizona companies expand northward. Similarly, Arizona business owners with Canadian relationships can use those connections to find customers, partners, and investment opportunities in Canada. Business travel encourages further engagement, successful partnerships create reasons to travel again, and investment strengthens the commercial relationship between both markets.

One of the roles I foresaw for the CABC was to become a leading resource for governments, companies, and investors seeking to develop and execute their Canada–Arizona strategies. I wanted the Council to be a place they could turn to for the deepest practical understanding we could provide of the opportunities between Canada and Arizona. That meant drawing on our research, business relationships, industry knowledge, and network of decision-makers to help them understand both markets, identify potential partners, assess opportunities, and determine how best to move forward. I believe the CABC should do more than make introductions; we should help those we work with develop their Canada–Arizona strategies, understand what it takes to execute them, and connect them with the people and resources that can help turn their plans into results.

Over the years, we expanded our work to include helping government jurisdictions understand their markets, identify potential partners, and build meaningful relationships that can lead to investment, trade, business development, and tourism. Knowing that an opportunity exists and having a strategy to capture it are two very different things.

A strategy should not simply sit on a shelf. It needs to identify specific opportunities, establish priorities, determine who needs to be involved, and set out practical steps for moving forward. The CABC provides research, guidance, introductions, and access to its network to help turn those plans into action.

For corporate members, this can mean identifying opportunities across the border. For counties and municipalities, it can mean developing stronger relationships with Canadian businesses and investors. For provinces, it can mean expanding connections with Arizona companies and decision-makers. In each case, our role is to help people understand the market, develop a workable approach, and help them execute their plans.This also involves the Governments of Canada and Arizona.

We have made a point of keeping the CABC constantly in touch with its members. We use online meetings through Zoom and Microsoft Teams to stay connected with members wherever they are in the world. We also use artificial intelligence and other digital technologies to support research, communication, and the identification of opportunities. Technology allows us to maintain relationships across distances and respond to changing business needs, and sound judgment remains at the heart of what we do.

I do not believe the CABC needs to involve itself in national politics to make a difference. Canada and the United States will sometimes disagree, but businesses still need still need to move forward across borders. I want us to remain focused on practical relationships between businesses, investors, and communities, regardless of the political headlines.

My seven years serving as Canada's Honorary Consul in Arizona reinforced how important personal relationships are to building lasting connections. Today, I continue to lead the CABC, maintain relationships, and develop initiatives while relying increasingly on the contributions of our members, advisors, and committee chairmen, as well as our 25 affiliate partners in Canada and Arizona.

As an eighth-generation Canadian and a long-time Arizona resident, I care deeply about both places. I founded the CABC because I saw a relationship with enormous potential and believed I could help it grow. I wanted to strengthen the business community already in Arizona and help companies expand across the border in a bilateral fashion by making a meaningful contribution to the communities I care about.

Over the more than two decades that I have been building the CABC, many people have contributed their time, knowledge, relationships, and support. I am grateful to every member, advisor, partner, and friend who has believed in our mission and helped make the organization what it is today.

First and foremost, I want to thank my wife, Karen, whose support, encouragement, and commitment have been instrumental throughout this journey. The support of my family has given me the strength and opportunity to pursue this vision over so many years. Their patience with my obsession has been amazing.

I also want to recognize Holly Estrada Mechsner, our Executive Director for the past 17 years, whose dedication, hard work, and commitment have been invaluable to the CABC's growth and continued success. Building an organization over this length of time

is never a solo effort, and I know how fortunate I have been to have these people beside me. To all of them, and to everyone who has played a part in this journey, I offer my sincere thanks.

The next chapter is about doing an even better job for the Canadian business community already here, while strengthening commercial ties with Arizona companies and creating opportunities in both directions. We should measure our success by the value we help create, businesses expanded, customers found, partnerships formed, strategies executed, projects advanced, and investments made.

After more than two decades, I remain convinced that the opportunity is right in front of us. The CABC exists to connect the right people, help businesses and governments execute their Canada–Arizona strategies, strengthen the business community already in Arizona, and help our members do deals.

Ultimately, our success is measured not by what the CABC accomplishes for itself, but by how successfully we help others achieve their goals. That is the mandate I set for this non profit, and it remains the principle that guides me today.