



## Community

Event brings together West Valley Jews; 28



# INDEPENDENT

## Benefit

Gala to support arts, culture; 29



October 21, 2026

Volume 29 Issue 42

Your Nonpartisan Community Newspaper • YourValley.net

## Development agreements help city order growth

Council details owner's duties for projects in new areas

By Jason Stone  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Surprise City Councilmember Nick Haney said he understands why residents in the rapidly growing area he serves wonder why infrastructure like roads were not in place before the homes were built.

But by passing a pair of development agreements in that northwest area, the Surprise City Council took more steps on Oct. 6 at growing in a more sensible order.

The council OK'd development deals for the Ana Mandara project at the northwest corner of 219th Avenue and Sun Valley Boulevard and the Vistas Montanas project near the northeast corner of 179th Avenue in Peakview Road.

"One of the things that I really like that we're doing now is we're actually working to have these development

• See **Growth** on page 6

## Dysart's Community Connection Tour makes case for Proposition 421



DUSD Superintendent Dr. John Croteau speaks to school bus riders consisting of parents and business representatives from all backgrounds and professions on the Community Connection Tour, Oct. 1. (Independent Newsmedia/Delarita Ford)

By Delarita Ford  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The best way educators could demonstrate why the Dysart Unified School District needs Proposition 421 to pass was to take community members on a scenic school bus ride to tour facilities and observe students and staff for a few hours to garner stakeholders' votes.

Although district personnel cannot tell people how to vote, they want them to be educated on Prop-

osition 421, which is on the ballot, as voters are reminded to either mail ballots by Tuesday, Oct. 27, or deliver it and vote by Election Day, Nov. 3.

Likewise, the district gave an inside look in to schools through the Community Connection Tour. Participants began their day with breakfast Oct. 1, in the DUSD governing board room at the district's administrative office, 15802 N. Parkview Place in Surprise. Adults witnessed

a day in the life of DUSD students, with breakfast and lunch provided to feed their physical appetites, and hunger for learning first-hand what students and staff experience during the day while attending classes.

Governing Board Member Mary Jane Ziola, joined parents and business representatives from all backgrounds and professions on a school bus trip to Asante Prepara-

• See **Tour** on page 11

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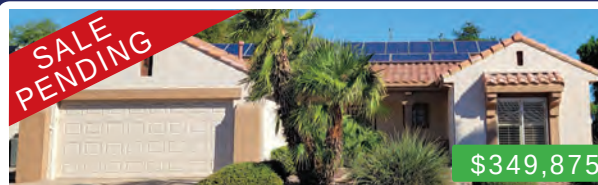
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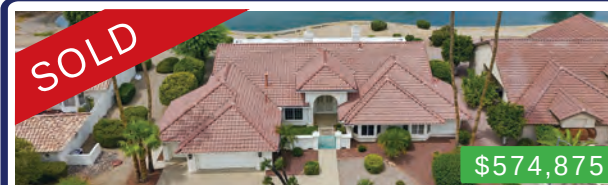
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## EDUCATION

# Dysart alums question school safety plan, investigation

By Delarita Ford  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

A group of former Dysart High School students continue to question school and district administrators about their former school's safety plan, including an investigation by the Arizona Department of Education into their concerns.

Former Dysart High School Student Body Vice President Cali Overs was spearheading an effort that included Dayna Siqueros, former student body president, Aubrey Messmer, former student body secretary, Joan de la Cruz, former student body treasurer, and Karma Wilson in questioning the Dysart Unified School District.

Overs, who graduated in the spring, returned to speak during the Oct. 5 governing board meeting regarding concerns she raised earlier in the year about the high school's safety protocols and practices. She was one of the three speakers during the meeting whose microphone was cut off at the 90-second mark.

Questioning the district's transparency, Overs said ADE opened an investigation into Dysart regarding practice school lockdown drills the students said were not conducted before it was closed two days before Dysart responded to the complaint.

"Not only did they cut the public speaking time in half, but I have sent several emails to the school district and governing board over the last eight months and have never received a response from them, other than one email claiming the district 'met or exceeded' state safety requirements without providing any proof to back up that claim," Overs stated to the Independent.

On Oct. 14, the district responded to the Independent's request for comment regarding its drills and

safety protocol.

"Safety is one of Dysart's top priorities, and we are proud to have strong protocols in place," the statement read. "However, in order to maintain the security of our campuses, we cannot share specific details about our Emergency Operations Plans with the public. Dysart's district requirements for safety drills exceed the current state requirements, which ADE has confirmed after reviewing our safety records relating to the inquiry."



Cali Overs

## Getting questions answered

For months, Overs said she repeatedly asked for details including specific dates of the three lockdown drills Dysart High School said were conducted during the 2025-26 school year while Overs was a senior.

"I submitted a public records request, and the district closed it, claiming that releasing the dates of past drills is a security risk. Everything about the way Dysart USD and its governing board handles legitimate accountability and safety concerns seems secretive and completely closed off to the public."

Overs provided all emails, texts and other correspondence she conducted between the school district, ADE and her. She planned to meet with Councilman Chris Judd to further discuss concerns since he meets with the superintendent and governing board president monthly, she said of her quest for answers.

She and the former student body officers detailed their continued concerns to the DUSD governing board, Superintendent Dr. John Croteau, Director of Safety Operations Jason Yea-

ger, the city mayor and council members. They also questioned how ADE handled its July 21 complaint about Dysart High's failure to conduct the three required lockdown drills during the 2025-26 school year, Overs said, and whether district administrators or governing board members had a hand in getting the complaint dismissed.

"Dysart Unified School District has repeatedly assured students, parents, and the community that it 'meets or exceeds' state safety requirements. However, based on our experiences during the 2025-2026 school year, we do not believe Dysart High School met the minimum requirements for lockdown drills. Despite repeated requests, the district has refused to provide the dates of the three lockdown drills it claims were conducted," Overs said.

The former students are concerned about Dysart High School's proximity to Rinchem, a chemical storage facility, as well as a proposed Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center less than a mile away as the "facilities present additional emergency preparedness concerns that many other schools do not face," according to Overs.

"If we cannot get straight answers about basic lockdown drills that have already occurred, it raises serious questions about whether the district is adequately prepared for emergencies involving these facilities," she added.

Governing Board Member Dawn Densmore responded to the allegations on Oct. 15. She reiterated school safety practices are taken, including lockdown drills. She confirmed more than the state requirements were completed at the school in question, and the district will not reveal all of its safety plans designed to protect students and staff.

"This is a very serious accusation that I, as a governing board member do not take lightly," said Densmore speaking on her experience and not representing the whole board.

"Additionally, any conversation had by the entire board regarding safety plans and lockdown drills are only to be held in executive session. We may not legally release the details of the drills, emergency operations plans or conversations held in executive session," she said.

Densmore added neither the board, nor the district can legally provide what Overs is requesting.

"Ms. Overs' persistence is remarkable and admirable, yet her passion is sadly misdirected," she said.

Regarding the ADE investigation, Densmore noted although she has worked for the state agency in various capacities she is recused from Dysart affairs, but remains passionate about school safety since she successfully advocated for officers in every Dysart school.

"I take the safety and health of all students and staff to heart. This extends far beyond our school district boundaries. To question my intent, my judgement, my character is out of line," Densmore said.

## Under review

After filing a formal complaint with the ADE, requesting a thorough and independent review, Overs and the others noted the information they obtained through public records requests raised "serious questions about whether this investigation was properly conducted."

## Timeline of complaints:

- July 21: Filed a formal complaint with the ADE regarding the failure to

• See **Question** on page 15



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**Brian Way stands with his father, Gregory Way, who demonstrates how to use his new app, Conversation Bridge. (Independent Newsmedia/Zev Black)**



## Resident creates app to help him talk

**By Zev Black and Jennifer Jimenez**  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Gregory Way, a Sun City resident and stroke survivor, was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2019. He was given five years to live, but has surpassed the estimate. To keep his brain fresh, he trains his brain with puzzles.

One of those puzzles was the creation of an app, called Conversation Bridge, designed to help people who have trouble speaking or are deaf. The program listens to an individual talk before turning their speech into text on the screen. The disabled individual can then use a suggested response which the app provides based on the conversation.

Gregory felt the need for this because he has speech problems in his everyday life which makes talking an "exhausting hurdle."

"(I was) frustrated by the gap between knowing what I wanted to say and getting the words out fast enough," he said. "I decided to use my background in software to build a solution."

Gregory's son, Brian, is very proud of him.

"It's a testament to people," he said. "Even after 40 years of programming, as long as you stay active with it, no matter what happens to your mind, you can stay working."

While Gregory has his own speech problems now, this is something he's seen firsthand his entire life.

One of Gregory's cousins is mostly deaf. Growing up, he could tell something was wrong, but wanted to understand the problem.

"As somebody that has seen both sides, only I'm not deaf, I generally think the normal people are doing

everything they can," Gregory said. "So, my advice to people with this problem or similar problems is to try not to get annoyed if people can't understand you."

Brian is hoping this is something that doesn't stop.

"It's a constant joy to watch him challenge his mind, especially as his life has had its difficulties," Brian said. "Keeping your mind sharp when things are hard is something that can really help your health, mental health, physical health and spiritual health. This keeps him active."

Gregory is hoping the app goes live by the end of the month.

Julie Killebrew, MSN, Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church health educator facilitator said the church offers educational series throughout the year and in the past

• See **App** on page 17

## Growth

• From page 1

agreements come before council, so we can see the obligations that these developers have to bring that infrastructure up to speed,” Haney said before the council took its vote on the second of the two agreements.

The Ana Mandara development encompasses around 207 acres on land annexed into the city in 1989. In a rezone to a planned area development in 2007, the area is zoned for commercial parcels, open space and a future fire station site.

The development agreement the council approved details the owner’s obligations for traffic signals, right-away access, water and wastewater infrastructure.

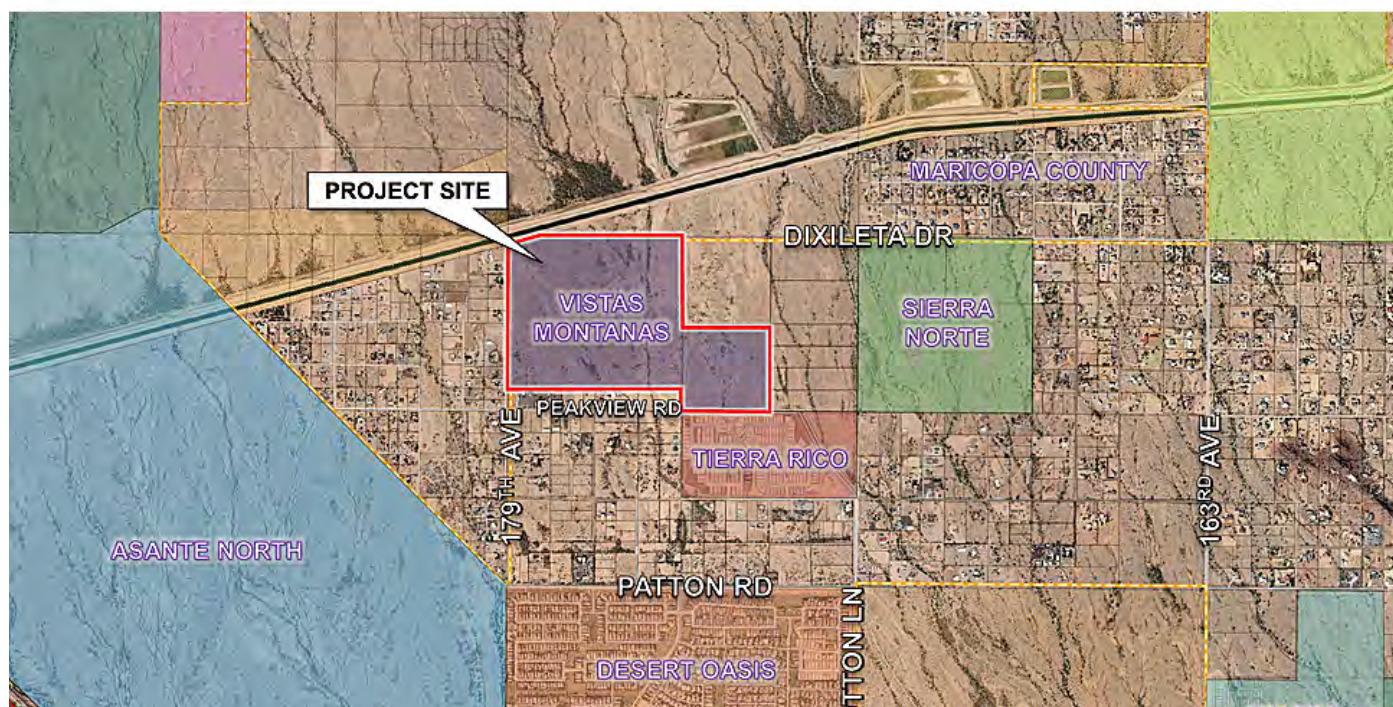
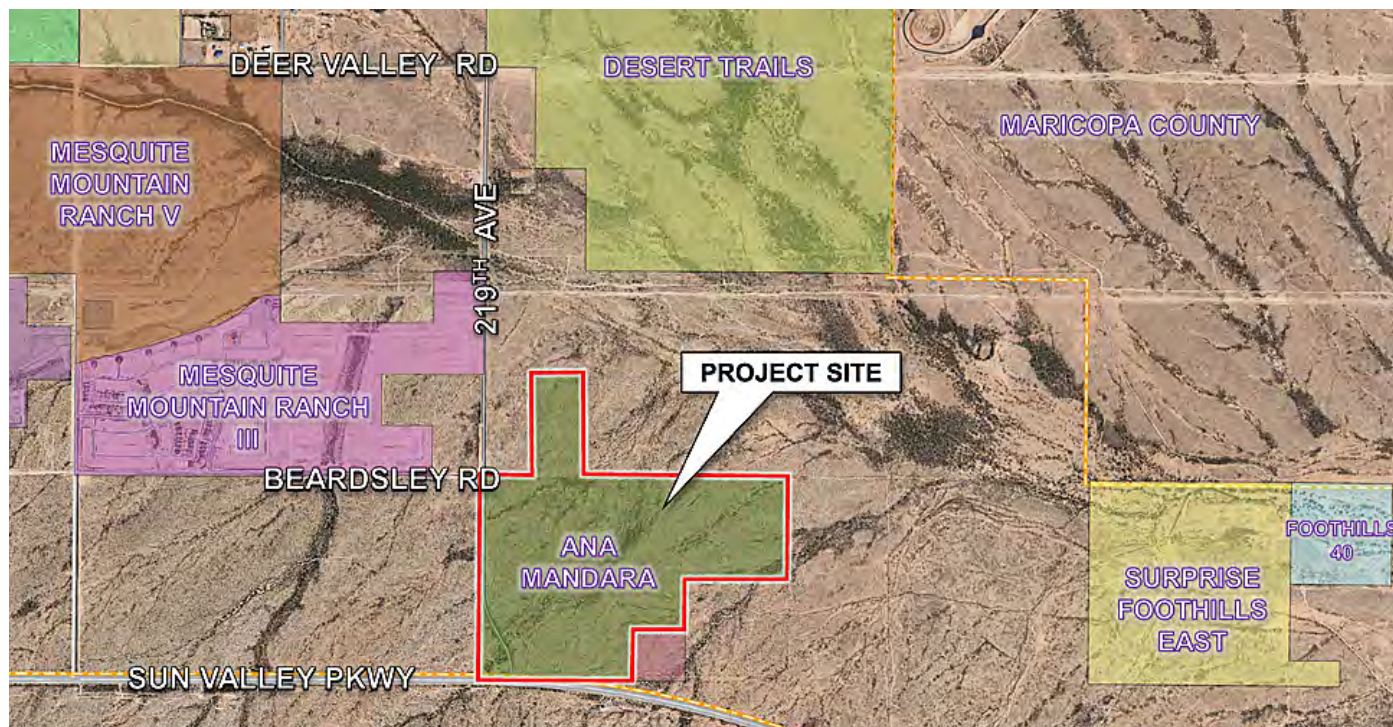
Developers are responsible for their proportionate share of the three traffic signals along the new 219th Avenue, including at Sun Valley Parkway and Beardsley Road.

“I can tell you 219th and Sun Valley Parkway is a signal that those folks out there really want, so it’s encouraging to see not only that the developers are having to pay their proportionate share, but hopefully we can get that traffic signal up there for them as soon as possible,” Haney said at the council meeting.

There are also requirements for recharging water at the city’s SPA3 basin and reserving land on Beardsley between 213th and 219th avenues for a future fire station.

The Vistas Montanas development agreement covers about 179 acres of land annexed into the city in 1988 at that northwest corner of 173rd and Peakview Road.

The council updated the PAD zoning in 2023 for single-family residential with a density of 2.9 dwelling units to the acre. The owner’s obligations include road improvements on 179th from Patton Road to the southwest corner of the property. Among



The Surprise City Council passed development agreements for the Ana Mandara, top, and Vistas Montanas projects in northwest Surprise at its Oct. 6 city council meeting. (Courtesy city of Surprise)

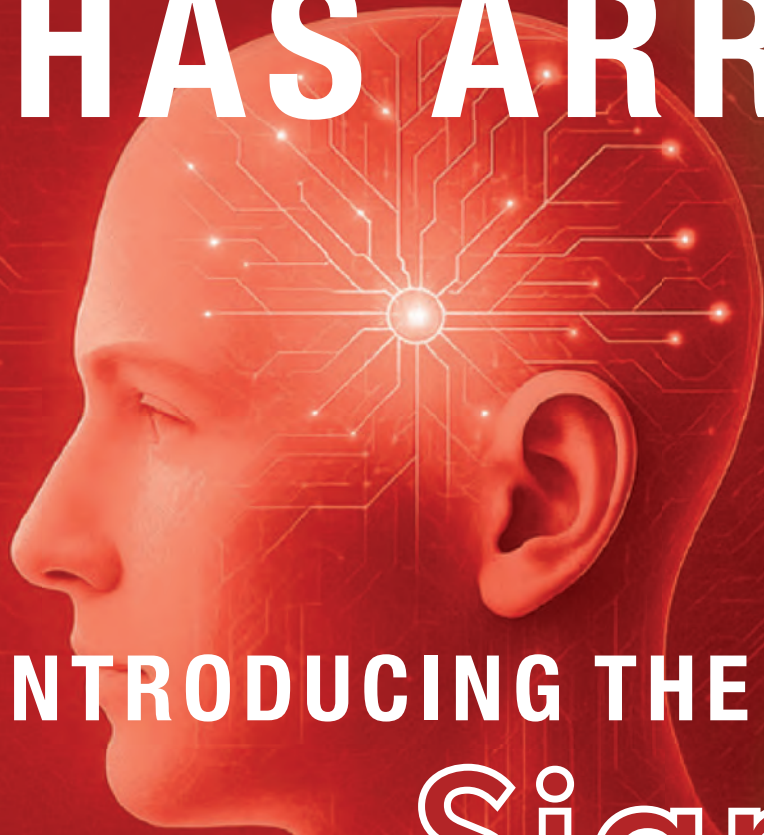
commitments include improving Peakview from 174th lane to 179th Avenue.

“Residents in the future are going to have that infrastructure sup-

port that growth, and it’s really been a step in the right direction for the northwest area,” Haney said before the unanimous votes on both development agreements.

Jason Stone can be reached at [jstone@iniusa.org](mailto:jstone@iniusa.org). Submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AzOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AzOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.

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## Tour

• From page 1

tory Academy, Cimarron Spring Middle School and Willow Canyon High School. While riding the bus, the superintendent, Dr. John Croteau, and other educators explained about inconveniences such as the long rides many students have to commute in the Asante area since “they keep growing,” he said.

“We will have to redo the maps again and move those kids to another school,” said Croteau, stressing the need for Proposition 421 so new elementary schools can be built to accommodate the rapid population growth in the Asante area.

Croteau mentioned portable classrooms and bathrooms being used, and aging buildings that require repairs districtwide. Pointing out the bus windows, he showed possible land properties where schools could be built in the community.

“We have to buy high school land. That is what you see on Proposition 421,” Croteau said. “Land is disappearing very quickly.”

He added how much easier it is for elementary schools to be built and welcomed in to many communities compared to high schools.

“Builders are very eager to donate elementary sites. They are not quick to donate high school sites,” noted Croteau.

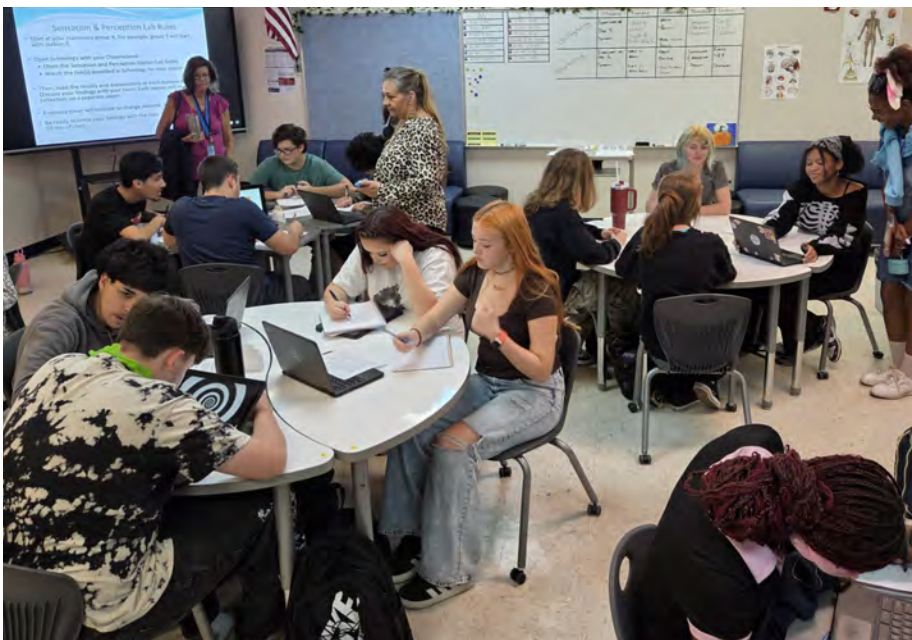
Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Marydel Speidell said Proposition 421 would help with costs to replace buses that are about 15-20 years old, traveled more than a million miles every year and are more expensive to maintain.

“Diesel is running over \$6 nationally,” said Speidell about the rising cost of fuel to fill the buses.

She added how many districts are struggling with facilities be-



Guests were welcomed by students and staff at the various schools for the Community Connection Tour. (Independent Newsmedia/Delarita Ford)



Community members got an inside look in to Asante Preparatory Academy, Cimarron Spring Middle School and Willow Canyon High School classrooms during the Community Connection Tour. (Independent Newsmedia/Delarita Ford)

ing over 20 years old and needing funds for repairs.

Approving Proposition 421 on the Nov. 3 ballot would fund:

- Constructing public restrooms and concessions for athletic facilities at the high schools.
- Getting new air conditioning systems.
- Installing new fire panels to improve safety at all schools.
- Constructing a new elementary

school to address the rapid growth in the district’s northwest territory.

- Acquiring high school land for the district’s future growth.

- Renovating aging facilities, to include constructing public restrooms for athletic facilities at high schools, upgrading the aging auditorium at Dysart High School, which is the district’s original high school.

“This is very informative. It’s

been different schools, so I like to learn about each different one,” said Pearl Puente, the mother of a senior and a fifth-grader. She added this is the third community tour she attended.

Impressed by the “level of execution and detail,” another parent W.O.W Williams, appreciated what she saw and learned from the tours that showcased students’ learning, bands and orchestras showcased for guests, teachers and principals offering guided tours and more.

“I was impressed with the learning environments, but concerned about what is needed to keep buildings up,” said Williams.

City of Surprise District 5 Councilman Jack Hastings gave classroom tours where he is an assistant principal. Regarding the education process and funding, the longtime Surprise resident and civics teacher in the district noted the importance of transparency in the classroom.

“We want to be an open book,” said Hastings, who serves as chair of the council’s Education Subcommittee.

He added the importance of improving curriculum and community involvement.

More details about school funding are below:

- Proposition 421 — See [Dysart.org/Prop421](http://dysart.org/Prop421) <http://dysart.org/Election>

- Budget Video — See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEm-BkdVZKf8>

- Frequently Asked Questions — see <https://dysart.org/mainsite/pages/finance-department/7712/frequently-asked-questions-about-elections>

To find a ballot drop box, go to: [Elections.Maricopa.gov](https://elections.maricopa.gov) and learn more at [dysart.org/Prop421](http://dysart.org/Prop421).

*Delarita Ford can be reached at [dford@iniusa.org](mailto:dford@iniusa.org). Submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AsOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AsOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.*

## BUSINESS

# Surprise dental practice has ribbon cutting

Dentists at Sycamore Farms, 16427 Cactus Road, Suite 109, in Surprise, recently held a ribbon cutting ceremony.

The owner of Dentists at Sycamore Farms, Dr. Mohammed Khakwani, was joined by city of Surprise Director of Economic Development Jeanine Jerkovic, a hygienist, Brooke Brown-Searles, and partner representative Cliff Yoder, West Valley Regional Chamber Business Development Specialist and others for the occasion.

The business specializing in oral health will help dental clients of all ages to brush up on their overall well-being. According to the company's website, personalized care with solutions will be offered to maintain healthy smiles, from a routine cleaning to advanced procedures like a root canal or a dental bridge.

Visit the establishment before Dec. 31 to get \$100 off dentistry services.

More information: [dentistsatsycamorefarms.com](http://dentistsatsycamorefarms.com).



Dr. Mohammed Khakwani, Dentists at Sycamore Farms owner shown in the ribbon cutting with Surprise Director of Economic Development Jeanine Jerkovic and other partner representatives to commemorate the opening. (Submitted photo/city of Surprise)

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## UPCOMING EVENTS



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November 3, 2026 • Starts at 1:00 PM



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## LETTERS

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 variety of reader opinions, as long as  
 they meet our Civility Guidelines.

This is the last edition before Election Day that will include new election-related letters to allow candidates to respond to criticisms about their candidacy. New election-related letters will run online only at [yourvalley.net](http://yourvalley.net) through Oct. 27.

### Everett and Densmore will put students first in Dysart

As voters consider who should serve on the Dysart Unified School District Governing Board, I believe two candidates stand out: Lisa Everett and Dawn Densmore.

Both women have demonstrated leadership in our community and understand that serving on a school board should be about one thing above all else: our students.

Everett and Densmore support school choice and recognize that parents should have options when deciding what educational environment is best for their children. But supporting school choice does not mean abandoning our public schools. Thousands of Dysart families depend on strong neighborhood schools, and those schools deserve board members committed to helping them succeed.

Our classrooms should remain focused on the fundamentals of education: reading, writing, mathematics, science, history and civics. Students need the academic foundation necessary to graduate prepared for college, a career, the military or whatever path they choose. Classrooms should be places of learning, not places where adults advance personal or political agendas.

Fiscal responsibility matters, as well. Dysart taxpayers provide significant resources to educate our children, and every dollar should be treated with respect. Everett and Densmore understand the importance of examining spending carefully, prioritizing class-

rooms, supporting quality teachers, maintaining safe facilities and ensuring that limited resources are directed where they provide the greatest benefit to students.

School board races do not always receive the attention of races higher on the ballot, but their impact on our families and communities is enormous. These board members make decisions affecting curriculum, budgets, teachers, facilities and thousands of children.

That is why I support Lisa Everett and Dawn Densmore for the Dysart Unified Governing Board.

They understand that parents matter, teachers matter, taxpayers matter — and most importantly, students come first.

**Jill Pearson**  
SURPRISE

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### It's everyone's responsibility to protect pets, wildlife

I found Jason Stone's article on coyotes easy reading and interesting. We live west of 303 toward the White Tank Mountains and have seen a few coyotes.

Seems we forget they were here before we moved into their territory and homes. Everyone should be reminded not to let their animals loose to roam the neighborhoods, as this attracts wild animals.

I constantly see posts "have you

seen my cat or dog, been missing for a day or more." Fences 6 feet high mean nothing to a coyote as they can easily jump 8-foot fences.

Coyotes are opportunists; they see you and evaluate the opportunity and make decisions to advance or not. On one occasion one walked by me at a distance of 6 feet.

Our three dogs can go out in the backyard as we have a dog door. It's closed when we are not home and at night.

It's our responsibility as pet owners to protect our animals.

If you are going walking, take a staff of some kind with you. Golf club missing the head, large walking stick, walking cane or some object. There are many options.

**Roger Sullivan**  
SURPRISE

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### Cutting through the fog of socialism, communism

We have seen and heard a lot about both socialism and communism since the 2026 election has gotten heated up. Much of it is inaccurate at best.

Let me see if I can cut through some of the fog and nonsense spouted by the proponents of these philosophies to help our community understand just what I believe they're being tricked into supporting.

Never forget that both are close on the same continuum, not opposites.

In 1917, a small group of revolutionaries led by Vladimir Lenin seized power in Russia. They promised a better, fairer world. Sound familiar? But soon after taking control, they began rounding up and executing

♦ See **Opinions** on page 16

## Take the Civility Pledge

Yes, I will do my part to help my community become a safe place for people to engage in civil discourse about public issues. Visit [iniusa.org/civility-pledge/](http://iniusa.org/civility-pledge/) to take the pledge.

## Your Opinion

Our opinions page is to provide an open forum for our readers. We hope to stimulate debate, not to dominate or control it. We reserve the right to edit our opinions, and we insist on civility. Please include your name and phone number, so we can contact you for clarification or confirmation. We welcome your photo. All opinions must be no more than 300 words. Those that are judged as personal attacks or complaints about neighbors, businesses or other opinion writers will not be considered. No person may submit more than two opinions for publication during a calendar month. Two submissions in the same issue will not be published. The content of a submission is the responsibility of the person who submitted it.

## Speak Up

We support the use of pen names. Too many people don't speak up because they fear intimidation or even danger to their families and/or careers. Pen names are an important part of our nation's history.

## Corrections

We will promptly correct all factual errors. We offer a "right of reply" to the people about whom we write. Readers who disagree with a news story are welcome to respond with a letter.

## Question

• From page 4

conduct the three required lockdown drills during the 2025–26 school year and concerns about Dysart’s future emergency preparedness.

• Aug. 25: ADE notified Overs it was opening an investigation in to the complaint. ADE contacted Dysart Unified School District by email the same day, requesting documentation regarding its lockdown drill compliance, including the 2025-26 drill schedule, compliance plan and completed debrief forms for the drills conducted.

• Aug. 26: The next day, another reporter contacted the ADE regarding students’ complaint, but ADE noted the investigation closed and Dysart Unified School District cleared of any wrongdoing.

• Aug. 28: Two days after the ADE closed its investigation, Dysart Unified School District “responded for

the first and only time to the ADE.” Jason Yeager, the district’s director of safety operations, provided a general summary regarding the school’s lockdown drill compliance, but withheld documentation that ADE requested.

• Sept. 4: ADE informed Overs and her peers that Dysart’s documentation was made available for inspection and was reviewed.

However, when Overs requested the complete investigation file through a public records request, ADE officials stated the Aug. 28 email correspondence from Yeager was the entire record, with no drill schedules, completed debrief forms or other supporting documentation provided. Based on the timeline, Overs said they do not understand how the ADE completed its investigation and determined the district complied with state requirements on Aug. 26, since the district had not responded to ADE’s request for documentation until Aug. 28.



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## Opinions

• From page 14

anyone who stood in their way. Lenin even ordered his followers to hang landowners and seize their crops — so that for miles around, “people see, and tremble.”

Then, it is speculated that Stalin may have murdered Lenin, showing his true colors. Marxism began with promises of a perfect world, the worker’s paradise, and ended in fear, famine, despair and deaths estimated at 60 million to 100 million during the 20th century.

A century later, these dangerous ideas have been repackaged and rebranded. They’re taught in schools and promoted by celebrity politicians using words such as “equity,” “diversity” and “social justice.” The words sound harmless, but the ideas behind them are the same.

Will they end up with the same terrifying results? Unquestionably. That road has always led to the same end goal and has never varied from it. Remember, it always starts out small in nice, happy-sounding platitudes or sound bites — until it bites you.

Here’s a test: Look up who was risking their lives in Europe after the Soviets took over: those in the West trying to escape freedom or those escaping the tyranny and brutality of the communist nations?

Vote carefully!

**Dave Frank**  
SURPRISE

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## Union, school negotiations bolster Arizona education

I am writing in response to Joe Pasta’s recent letter citing his opposition to labor unions in Arizona, specifically in the area of education.

He alleges that the nation’s sec-

ond-largest education union “has done little to promote better education practices or better classroom conditions,” but he offers no proof for that claim.

Contract negotiations between unions and boards of education produce limits on class size, disciplinary standards for students, guaranteed preparation time for teachers, safety measures to protect students and employees, and other provisions that serve the interests of the public, the employees and the school boards.

In my 35 years representing education employees, I found that unions produced enhanced relationships between employers and employees through the collective-bargaining process.

Mr. Pasta claims that union members have little or no influence on how their dues money is spent. Nothing can be further from the truth. Effective unions are run through the active participation of the membership, and a union leader who keeps his members in the dark is quickly voted out of office.

Collective bargaining has worked well for union members since its inception. Workers in states with bargaining laws outpace those who work in non-bargaining states in salaries, healthcare benefits and job stability. Employers in bargaining states enjoy greater long-term employee job retention because employees are satisfied with their working conditions.

Mr. Pasta contends that there’s no need for public sector collective bargaining in Arizona “unless there is an erosion of ... fairness.” That erosion has been occurring for many years and has contributed to the critical teacher shortage in our state. It’s time to pass a collective-bargaining law.

**Bob Coffee**  
SURPRISE

*This writer is using a pen name. Submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters), or email them to [AsOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AsOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.*

## App

• From page 5

has stroke-related presenters.

“Of course, it is important for all members of the community of Sun City West to be aware of the signs and symptoms of stroke,” she said.

The American Heart Association uses the acronym F.A.S.T. to help people recognize the signs. This includes face drooping, arm weakness, speech difficulty and time to call 9-1-1. They suggest is to ask a person to smile and raise both arms. Decipher if that person is having slurred speech or unable to speak and understand. If someone shows any of these symptoms, call 9-1-1- even if those subside and get to the hospital immediately.

“Our church has a group of volunteers called ‘HeartSavers.’ This group has been a part of Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church for over 25 years. Each volunteer is

trained in Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation and the use of Automatic External Defibrillators, in addition to basic first aid interventions,” said Killebrew.

Two individuals of the group are available at each church service and events at the church.

Coming up 9 a.m. Tuesday, Nov. 17, in Fellowship Hall, 13658 W. Meeker Blvd., LP Health Directions, a CPR and First Aid certification company that conducts classes throughout Arizona, will provide the instruction.

This event is open to the community for \$25 per participant. The space is limited to 10 people. Register and pay online at [shepherdumc.org](http://shepherdumc.org).

*Reporter Zev Black can be reached at [zblack@iniusa.org](mailto:zblack@iniusa.org). Reporter Jennifer Jimenez can be reached at [jjimenez@iniusa.org](mailto:jjimenez@iniusa.org). Please submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AzOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AzOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.*



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## LEGACY CONTINUES TO THANK VETS

Our Lady of Lourdes Women's Guild honors the memory of its former member, Mary Jane Frances McSparran OFS, by continuing Mary Jane's "Stars for Our Troops" project in Sun City West. Mary Jane died in May 2026 at age 93 and participated until a few weeks before her death. This project rescues stars from worn and torn American flags that can no longer fly. Guild members assemble the stars packets on the second Wednesday of each month. The packets include a star cut from a tattered flag and a card which recognizes the veteran's service. These stars packets are handed out to veterans and U.S. military members across the country. The assembly of the packets is supervised by Frances' son Daniel McSparran and her daughter-in-law Kelsie Hughes McSparran. (Submitted photo/Our Lady of Lourdes Womens Guild)



## SENIOR CENTER RECEIVES DONATION

Greg Emery, pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church, and Mary Jo Steger, office manager at the church, donated to the Banner Olive Branch Senior Center to help support its food programs and food pantry. From left are Jennifer Lawless, director Banner Olive Branch Senior Center, Emery and Steger. (Submitted photo/Jennifer Lawless)



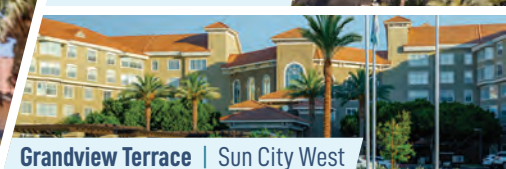
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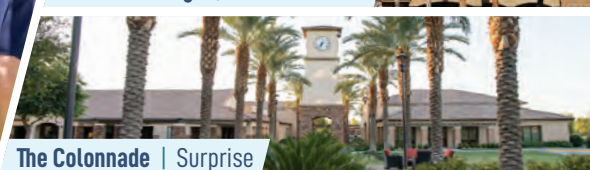
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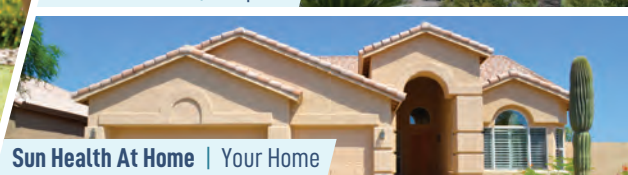
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## CHURCH HOSTS DINNER, SHOW

The Sun Seekers dinner and entertainment is 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 27, at Desert Garden United Church of Christ, 18818 N. 128th Ave. There will be a spaghetti and meatball dinner with garlic bread and salad. Cost is \$15. Bring a beverage. (Submitted photo/Desert Garden United Church of Christ)

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COMMUNITY

# Banner CEO promotes bringing together clergy

By **Jennifer Jimenez**  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Banner Health is connecting with clergy and religious leaders in the community focusing on overall care of the mind, body and spirit.

Boswell Medical Center and Del E. Webb Medical Center Chief Operating Officer Stan Holm will join chaplains at Boswell, 10401 W. Thunderbird Blvd., for a clergy lunch.

Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church Pastor Ron Friesen said this networking event brings everyone together, because most of them do not know each other and that is good to connect.

“What this communicates to the clergy and religious leaders of the community is the Banner Health system itself is open to the spiritual care.

They recognize we are physically, emotionally, relational and spiritual beings and the Banner system does that well,” said Friesen.

He said it is also welcoming for he has a pastor to get together with the chaplains at the hospitals and is positive affirmation to know they are always there to administer to the parishioners as well.

Shepherd of the Hills Health Educator Julie Killebrew said taking part in this event helps to connect her with other organizations in the community to bring them out to the church.

“I find other people and groups to get the word out about their services that are beneficial to people in need,” said Killebrew.

Other connections are made as well, including a church member calling to



**Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church Pastor Daniel Gómez, Julie Killebrew, MSN and Pastor Ron Friesen. (Submitted photo/Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church)**

have someone to visit her mother in the hospital. Killebrew said Friesen was able to arrange for a chaplain to visit and that made a big difference for her and her daughter.

When Holm took the job three years ago as CEO, he brought this program of connecting clergy and spiritual leaders with Banner Health to ensure they felt welcomed. He said beyond the walls of

the hospitals there is the Banner Olive Branch Senior Center and food pantry, which he said they do a billion dollars a year in community benefit, which is just one of many spokes to connect and serve the community.

He said in leadership at Banner Health ideas to connect with the community are embraced, adding the goals of this lunch is to let spiritual leaders know they are welcome and should feel comfortable when going to see individuals from a congregation and in a way that helps those patients. The second is to learn and connect with each other and strengthen those connections between Banner Health and those individuals.

Holm said anytime there is an opportunity for community partnerships, it strengthens many sides of care.

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## INTERFAITH

# Temple Beth Shalom offers 'Character Development in Our Lives Today'

Temple Beth Shalom of the West Valley, 12202 N. 101st Ave., will present a three-part interfaith series, "The Importance of Character Development in Our Lives Today," starting in November.

"Modern positive psychology suggests that character is not simply fixed," Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, who will lead the discussions, said. "It can be understood, strengthened and developed throughout life."

The series is open to people of all faiths. Participants will explore the character strengths that help people flourish: curiosity, perseverance, kindness, hope, wisdom, gratitude and humor.

"It is about more than becoming 'better people,'" Kaplan said. "It is about living with greater purpose, building stronger relationships, handling adversity more effectively, and discovering new possibilities for growth at every stage of life. Character matters—and it is never too late to work on ours."

The series will be 10-11:30 a.m. Monday's Nov. 2, 9 and 16 at the



Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan. (Submitted Photo/Lori Baker)

temple. Cost is \$20 for temple members and \$35 for non-members. A discount is available by purchasing a coupon book of four courses.

The registration deadline is noon Wednesday, Oct. 28 by calling the temple office at 623-977-3240. On-line registration and payment is also available at tbsaz.org.

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## FAITH

# Installation ceremony set for Rabbi Lev Ettelson

By Jennifer Jimenez  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Rabbi Lev Ettelson of the Beth Emeth Congregation of the West Valley will participate in an installation ceremony later this month.

The event is 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 25, at Beth Emeth Congregation of the West Valley, 13702 W. Meeker Blvd.

"Becoming a rabbi has been a long journey, and I took an unusual path than most. About 30 years ago I returned from Israel where I had been studying, and a mentor of mine Rabbi Marc Soloway of Congregation Bonai Shalom in Colorado was teaching at the university. We would meet in his office and he asked if I had considered becoming a rabbi," said Ettelson.

During that time he was involved with Jewish education and was a con-

gregation interim spiritual leader in Boulder, Colorado, for one year.

He returned to Tuscon to teach and live before applying for and receiving the cantor job in Sun City West.

Ettelson completed the independent Rabbinical Academy in New York and had the ordination in June.

Ettelson also recently conducted baby naming ceremonies, which he said were joyful to have young families with their babies and small children and also completes pastoral counseling.

"I am looking forward to reaching out to the wider community of the West Valley. I am planning to visit these Jewish social organizations in various 55-plus communities, called Shalom Clubs," he said.

Additionally, he wants to offer a ramp for those who do not have much

of a Jewish background and try to make things more accessible and add a beginners service once a month. He will also continue working with inter-faith in the area.

The installation ceremony is a way of marking a dedication, Ettelson said. Soloway has been something of a role model for close to 30 years.

"This is something I resisted for many years, and I think because of a certain measure of trepidation, and this is a great responsibility to lead a congregation, and I was not sure if I was up for it. Being here and serving for three years I have learned a lot and am very grateful for my community and the opportunity to serve in many ways," he explained.

Ettelson said even though it has taken him decades, the process has been

evolutionary, and he knows he was always meant to do that, but "was the last to know." He enjoys having ongoing conversations across generations clarifying the laws and customs and how to apply those to a lifetime.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi first planted the seed in Ettelson's head to become a rabbi.

"I met him at two important junctures in my life. The first when I turned 30 and he opened up something for me after driving away from being Jewish. He asked if I would ever consider being a rabbi," he said.

Before he died, he gave Ettelson an ordination and he made a promise to complete the rabbinic ordination.

Ettelson's father also received a promise from his son to complete the ordination.

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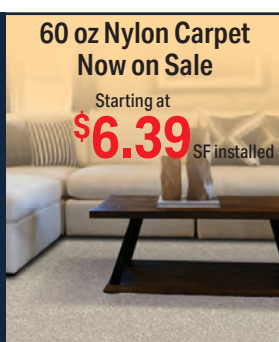
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## EVENT

# Sun City West Independent Senior Expo coming soon

By Jennifer Jimenez  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Sun City West Independent Senior Expo is 9 a.m.-noon Wednesday, Oct. 28, at the Sun City West Foundation, 14465 R.H. Johnson Blvd.

Sun City West residents have the opportunity to explore a variety of products and services. Participants can access essential health screenings plus take advantage of free giveaways

and door prizes.

The business sponsors include Agent Cruz 360, Arizona Broadway Theatre, Cardiac Solutions and SCAN Health Plan.

Walgreens will be giving flu, COVID and other immunizations during this event. Individuals should bring their Medicare card.

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## TECH

# Cell towers on school grounds bring revenue

By Delarita Ford  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Using cell phones may not be allowed in many classrooms, but the cell towers are permitted at Dysart schools to generate revenue for the district.

The Dysart Unified School District governing board members heard an Oct. 5 presentation on the cell tower agreements the district has to allow telecom carriers to install, maintain and access equipment on school sites, with rent payments, routine maintenance notices and emergency access.

While the ownership of towers differ, some are district-owned and others are carrier-owned, according to a staff report.

During the meeting, DUSD Director of Planning and Development

Christian Godoy presented information on the district's current cell tower agreements, including site locations, agreement terms and the revenue generated from the agreements. He was later joined by Steven Kennedy, a consultant who shared details about wireless networks and non-ionizing energy, exposure limits and federal requirements.

"Part of my duties is overseeing the various cell tower agreements that we have with telecom carriers," said Godoy, who is new in the position.

Spotlighting how the agreements function, details included how the Telecom companies paid for the monopolies to be constructed across several school sites in the early 2000s to house their maintenance equipment such as cables and powerboxes

in the "equipment shelters." They provide cellular coverage in the surrounding area, said Godoy.

"In exchange for maintaining these facilities on district properties, the carriers paid the district what is essentially a rent," he said, adding the easement agreements established compensation, access to the sites and maintenance to the facilities.

The agreements allow carriers access to the sites for routine maintenance and improvements as long as it is coordinated with the district and performed outside of school hours, he noted.

Likewise, Kennedy explained to the board about the inner workings of the cell towers, using terms like non-ionizing and "current science." The cell towers reportedly pose no "proven health risks," as stated in the

presentation, noting risks are below exposure limits set by the FCC.

Board member Denise Destiche wanted to know what the FCC and OSHA requirements were. She requested detailed readings and more information from all the towers.

Similarly, board member Jennifer Drake asked about the levels and readings. She also wanted to know the justification for the towers to be located on school campuses rather than other nearby properties. Board member Dawn Densmore pointed out how some towers also serve as field lights and questioned losing those if a lease should lapse.

The next DUSD governing board meeting is 6 p.m. Monday, Oct. 26, at the Dysart Education Center, 15802 N. Parkview Place. Doors open 5:30 p.m.

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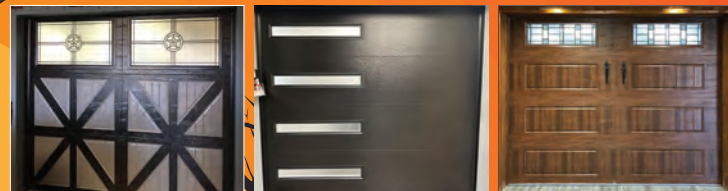
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## MUSIC

# Music club to play eclectic mix for next show

The Grand Music Club invites the community to experience a weekend of "Music without Boundaries," which takes place over three consecutive days Nov. 13-15, in the Sonoran Ballroom at The Grand, 19753 N. Remington Drive.

Directed by Harvey Finstein, "Music without Boundaries" takes audiences on a journey through diverse musical genres, eras and cultures. Attendees can expect a lineup of our talented musicians performing everything from classical and



Harvey Finstein (Submitted photo/Grand Music Club)

timeless rock standards to contemporary hits and jazz.

The show kicks off with evening performances 7 p.m. Friday, Nov. 13. and Saturday, Nov. 14. The matinee performance at 3 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 15, makes it the perfect afternoon outing for local entertainment seekers.

Purchase tickets (\$20) at [grandmusicclub.com](http://grandmusicclub.com) or in person at the Sonoran Plaza Activities Desk. The desk is open 8 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays.

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## Surprise collecting household hazardous waste

The city of Surprise is offering household hazardous waste collection for residents to help protect the environment by properly disposing of items that may contain harmful chemicals.

Residents can request an appointment for HHW collection pickups right from their driveway. Pickups are scheduled from February through November.

The collection of materials is split into two types and scheduled separately. One pick-up is for electronic HHW, and another is for all other HHW. Schedule a collection date at [surpriseaz.gov/HHW](http://surpriseaz.gov/HHW).

Upcoming pickup periods are as follows: Nov. 2-5, Feb. 8-11, March 8-11, April 5-8, May 10-13 and June 7-10

Other options to dispose of household hazardous waste and latex paint include the following:

- Motor oil – Contact a local auto parts store or shop. Typically, these establishments will dispose of used oil for free.
- Propane tanks (grill) – They can be dropped off at most propane refill or exchange locations.
- Latex paint – Properly dispose of small quantities of latex paint by removing the lid and letting it dry. When it's dry, place it in a bag and discard it with regular household trash.
- Lithium-ion and rechargeable batteries (power tools, laptop batteries, etc.) – These are accepted for drop off at most big box hardware stores for no charge. A list of locations can be found at [batterysafetynow.org](http://batterysafetynow.org).

## MUSIC

# Church to welcome West Valley Ensemble

Lakeview United Methodist Church, 10298 W. Thunderbird Blvd., is hosting a concert featuring the West Valley Wind Ensemble 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 29. The show will last approximately one hour.

The Ensemble is a 55-piece concert band comprised of volunteers who have continued their high school and college love for making music. Beginning in 1992, the group plays a balance of tunes, usually including marches too. It are funded entirely through donations and contributions received at concerts, online and by mail.

There is a suggested donation of \$10 and non-perishable food items are also welcomed.

For more information, contact the church office at 623-974-5821.



(Submitted Photo/Caryl Jo Dagro)

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## COMMUNITY

# Surprise expo draws together West Valley Jews

## Kosher food, Judaica items up for sale at third annual event

By Jason Stone

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Adam Russo is an Orthodox Jew who lives in Peoria. However, the food he makes is very worldly.

Russo's day job is cooking full-time for Thomas Cuisine, where he oversees culinary for the Valleywise Health Medical Center.

However, his fun job is provide kosher food to Jews on board Norwegian cruise ships in a program called Fresh Kosher Sea.

He sails the Caribbean often, but also has trips coming up to Panama, Central America, the Mediterranean and Hawaii.

West Valley Jews were able to get a taste of that world flair on Sunday when Russo provided a kosher meal as one of about a dozen vendors who set up at the third annual Jewish Expo in Surprise.

This year's event attracted Melanie Sharaz, who was Miss Israel 2025, Jewish goods, Jewish philanthropy group, a Judaica store and even an educational game to help children learn Hebrew.

The gathering commemorated the third anniversary of the attacks

on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

It was the first big third-party event at the Surprise Community and Resource Center, which officially opened last month in the Original Town Site.

Seth Dyson, the city's director for the Human Services and Community Vitality Department, was on hand to check out the event in the new building that his department operates.

"We're excited to have third parties like this," Dyson said. "They want to bring community together. That's why we built this beautiful new building."

Susan Hersch, of Beth Emeth Congregation in Sun City West, sold some items in the physical shop the congregation manages. Hersch offered homemade items, such as candles, Hanukkah paraphernalia and artsy menorahs in various styles.

Former Jewish teacher and author Ora Kurland was selling a game with hands-on lessons to help children ages 3-8 to learn Hebrew.

She put together kits where users can play with Play-Doh to make Hebrew letters to make learning more fun.

"It's a lot of fun for me, and the kids and the teachers love it,"



Adam Russo, right, serves food to Rabbi Sholom Lew, of the Chabad of the West Valley, at the third annual Jewish Expo on Oct. 11 at the new Surprise Community and Resource Center. (Independent Newsmedia/Jason Stone)

said Kurland, who taught Hebrew schools in New York City and Phoenix. "They're all materials that I developed during my teaching career."

She normally sells everything in the kit for about \$113, but offered a discount of \$99.99 for the expo.

Cindy Golisch, of the nonprofit Jewish Free Loans, made the trip from her Scottsdale base to offer interest free loans of up to \$10,000 for the Jewish community.

"You could use it for food. You could use it for a car. You could use it to go to summer camp for your kids, to send your kids to preschool," Golisch said. "We just had somebody use it for in vitro fertilization last week."

Golisch said expos like this one were a great way to promote the business.

"I'm really excited to be here and meet members in the Jewish community in the West Valley and shake

some hands," Golisch said.

Adrienne Kirschner, who lives in the Grand, is helping with her husband to raise money for a physical building for the Jewish Surprise congregation that Rabbi Shlomo Ceitlin started.

"I think it's really important that the Jewish community has a place to go and to be for our young people," said Kirschner, who estimated about 3,000 Jews live in Surprise.

Dyson said as staffing increases, events like the Jewish Expo can happen seven days a week in the new facility.

"It's in the Original Town Site, and probably some people never been here before, so how neat is that?" Dyson said.

*Jason Stone can be reached at [jstone@iniusa.org](mailto:jstone@iniusa.org). Submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AzOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AzOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.*



The Klezmer Chai Toons Band, which plays instrumental traditions of the Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, provide entertainment at the third annual Jewish Expo on Oct. 11 at the new Surprise Community and Resource Center. (Independent Newsmedia/Jason Stone)

**BENEFIT**

Couples dance in an undated photo. A Night to Remember will feature big band music and swing dancing Nov. 14 at Flite Goodyear. The World War II-themed fundraiser will benefit the P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center and West Valley Arts Council. (Submitted photo/West Valley Arts Council)

# Gala to benefit Surprise-based West Valley Arts Council

**A Night to Remember will feature big band music, swing dancing and World War II-era vehicles at Flite Goodyear**

A World War II-themed fundraiser Nov. 14 in Goodyear will benefit the P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center and West Valley Arts Council.

A Night to Remember will take place 6-10 p.m. inside the historic hangar at Flite Goodyear, 1300 S. Litchfield Road.

The evening will feature big band music, swing dancing, art, military and classic vehicles, themed food

stations and auctions. Guests are encouraged to wear 1940s attire.

Families and community members can submit names, photos and stories of World War II veterans for a Wall of Heroes tribute displayed during the event. Submissions can be made through the event website.

For tickets, event information and tribute submissions, visit [nighttoremember.org](http://nighttoremember.org).

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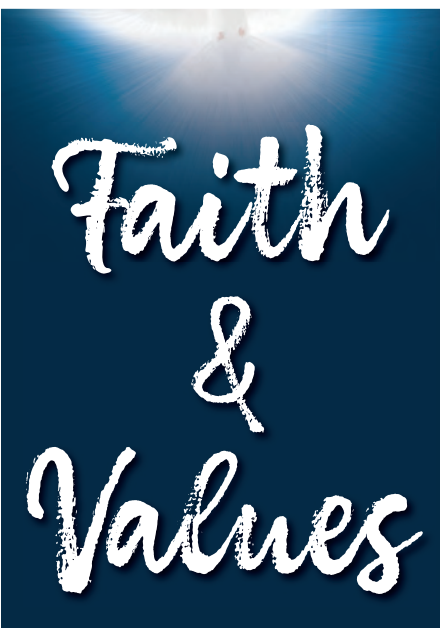
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# Miss Israel 2025 speaks on Jewish unity

By Jason Stone  
 INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Melanie Sharaz was like any young, Israeli woman on the evening of Oct. 6, 2023.

The then-23-year-old successful business tech leader was in Tel Aviv celebrating a friend's birthday with more than two dozen others.

"What we didn't know at the time was that was going to be the last time we were ever all going to be in the same place," Sharaz told a gathered crowd at the Surprise Community and Resource Center. "Not only was that the last time I would see some of my friends until this day, it's also the last time that I think our hearts felt light."

"We were able to party and celebrate and have fun and not really think about anything."

Sharaz, who was crowned Miss Israel in 2025, was the keynote speaker at the third Jewish Expo to commemorate the Oct. 7 attacks in Israel.

She detailed how the attacks led her to enter pageants as a way to grab a big platform to promote Jewish unity.

"I will do everything I can until my last breath to make sure that that never happens again," Sharaz told a hundred or so people in the audience. "That's why I'm sitting



Miss Israel 2025 Melanie Sharaz shares the story about how she went from a data scientist for tech companies to using her pageant platform to promote unity for Israel. (Independent Newsmedia/Jason Stone)

here today."

Sharaz was born in Israel but raised near Miami before moving to the West Coast to attend the Uni-

versity of California in Berkeley, a campus known for its strong activism.

When she arrived on campus, she got her first real taste of antisemitism in America since she felt mostly shielded from it in the heavily Jewish areas of south Florida, where she went to Jewish schools and had Jewish friends.

After arriving on campus in 2016 she was greeted with some Palestinian flags around campus.

"I think really shaped my understanding of what it means to be Jewish, as well as started making me an advocate for my people," Sharaz said. "I made sure that every time I saw a Palestinian flag from the day I arrived to campus, I would be there holding an Israeli flag. That's the mentality that I have carried with me some 10 years ago that day until today."

Sharaz said she felt hopeless and helpless after Oct. 7, even though she had built up a nice life for herself at such a young age. She was head data scientist for multiple tech companies in Israel after college and opened her own office in London. But that no longer seemed important in the weeks after the attacks.

"When it came time to open up my laptop and talk to my employ-

• See **Unity** on page 31

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## Unity

• From page 30

ees and talk about product features and things like that, it all felt really meaningless to me all of a sudden," Sharaz said.

That is when the idea to vie for the Miss Israel crown came about. She figured that would be a way to serve Israel to combat growing antisemitism worldwide.

"I was never a high heels or dress kind of person," Sharaz said. "I had two colors in my wardrobe. They were black and white. I had to learn everything from scratch."

After Sharaz was crowned Miss Israel and later Miss Israel Universe, she traveled to Bangkok for the 2025 Miss Universe pageant.

Politics took centerstage, though, when for the first time a Miss Universe Palestine was sent to the contest, Sharaz believes to counteract

her advocacy for Israel.

But Sharaz said she went in with an open mind competing against Palestinian model Nadeen Ayoub.

"Maybe we can show this as an opportunity for bridge building to the world," Sharaz thought about the possible benefits of the competition. "Very quickly, I understood was not what the other side had in mind."

Shiraz, Ayoub and the other contestants were together for three weeks to prepare for the pageant. Shiraz believes the Miss Universe Organization deliberately placed the two next to each other on stage during the pageant.

"The photos that were taken from that were then misconstrued and edited and manipulated to create a false narrative in which this evil, big, bad Israeli was wishing ill upon the Palestinians, which was the other way I wanted," Sharaz said. "That really landed me all

over the place in a very negative way, even though I didn't do anything wrong."

Sharaz began getting threats to her security as she became a target worldwide. The negative social media chatter was unrelenting, she said.

"It was heightened because I was representing Israel in a very visible way," Sharaz said.

Officers from the Arizona Rangers provided security for Sunday's event in Surprise.

Attendees were not notified of the location of it until they bought a ticket.

Grand resident Adrienne Kirschner, who along with her husband is helping Jewish Surprise toward a physical building in Surprise, said antisemitism is worse, in her estimation, than anytime in her 82 years alive.

"This is what it must have looked like in Germany," Kirschner said

about the anti-Jewish sentiment worldwide. "Some of my friends hide that they're Jewish. Me? I am out there. If we hide, they win."

Sharaz said she never considers hiding her Star of David.

"I am always very steadfast in who I am and not allow others to make me feel ashamed of it," Sharaz said.

Rabbi Shlomo Ceitlin, who organizes the Jewish Expos through his Jewish Surprise chabad, said it is the duty for Jews around the world to not hide in a time of skyrocketing antisemitism.

"On the contrary, it's to be proud of who we are, proud Jews, to be united with one another, and that's what this event is all about," Ceitlin told the crowd.

*Jason Stone can be reached at [jstone@iniusa.org](mailto:jstone@iniusa.org). Submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AzOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AzOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.*



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