

From: John Spevak [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, April 1, 2026 10:13 AM
To: Vionna Lin <vionna.lin@losbanos.org>
Subject: Public Comment for April 1 City Council Meeting



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Mayor and Councilmembers,

I had intended to make this public comment in person, but an unexpected family obligation came up that prevented me.

I appreciate being able to make this comment online and have it read into the record.

My name is John Spevak, a longtime Los Banos resident. I served on the Los Banos Parks and Recreation Commission or the Tree Commission for the past 25 years, but as of January 1, I am no longer a member. I "retired."

At the last Parks and Rec Commission I attended as a member, I made a motion, which was seconded and passed unanimously, that the commission recommend to the city council that the gym in the Los Banos Community Center be named the Joe Sousa Gym.

As I said at that commission meeting, and in a column I wrote several months before, that Mr. Sousa deserves this recognition, not only for his many years of productive public service to the city as city employee and later a city councilmember, but specifically for all the work he put into helping Los Banos use available grant funding to build a community center and his determination to see it through to completion. In addition, he worked tirelessly to make sure a gym was included, primarily for the youth of the city.

I have attached the report of that commission meeting printed in the Oct. 29, 2025 edition of The Westside Express, as well as a column I wrote for the Sept. 24 edition, which explains in more detail why I believe the gym should be named after Mr. Sousa.

Today, I'm asking the council to consider moving forward the recommendation from the Parks and Rec Commission. And if I can help in any way to move it forward, please contact me.

Respectfully

John Spevak

LB commission recommends canal lighting times and honoring Joe Sousa

Sub: Heim gives updates on completed, active, proposed projects

Staff Reports

At its Oct. 21 meeting, the Los Banos Parks and Recreation Commission recommended times when the Canal Trail solar lights will be on, heard ideas regarding a proposed new pump track and recommended that the gym in the community center be named in honor of Joe Sousa.

The commission also received a detailed update from Parks and Recreation Director Joe Heim on park projects recently completed, in progress and proposed.

All five members of the commission were present: Chair Jeri Blevins and Commissioners Luis Castro, Brad Gargano, Sybil Halloran and John Spevak.

The installation of solar lights for the Los Banos Canal Trail between Pioneer Road and Center Avenue, made possible in part by a grant from the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Water Authority, has been approved by the city council. Heim presented seven options to the commission for when the lights would be turned on.

After extensive discussion, the commission unanimously recommended the option which provided the lights come on at dusk, dim to 30% after six hours and turn off at dawn. Commissioner Gargano said he felt it would be the best for users of the trail and for the overall safety of the area, and the other commissioners agreed with him.

The council was also assured by Heim that the lighting should not create problems for residents who live adjacent to the trail. "We want, above all," he said, "to be good neighbors."

Now the recommendation will be taken to the city council for their consideration. As Heim mentioned, once the lights are installed and turned on, the lighting hours may change to benefit either the nearby residents or users of the trail.

The creation of a pump track, a project that has been talked about for some time at previous commission meetings, was again presented to the commission, this time with suggestions for track regulations.

A pump track, as Heim pointed out, is an area designed with dirt hills and berms for cyclists to navigate by pumping their bikes vigorously. This would be the first pump track for Los Banos and would tentatively be located on the east side of town.

Among the proposed regulations, it would be "limited to non-motorized, human-powered bicycles" and that all users of the track would be required "to wear a properly fitted helmet."

The commissioners, by consensus, felt that the proposed regulations made sense and encouraged Heim to go forward and make the pump track a reality.

Heim said that two public meetings would be held to receive community input on the pump track -- on Thursday, Nov. 13 at 5:30 p.m. and on Saturday, Nov. 15 at noon, both in the Los Banos Community Center (645 Seventh St.).

Regarding the community center, Heim agendaized a request to name the gymnasium in the community center in honor of Joe Sousa. As the agenda item stated, "Joe Sousa served the City of Los

Banos for 26 years, advancing from the position of Park Maintenance II to Public Services Director” and “later served for six years on the city council.”

As Commissioner Spevak said during the discussion, “Joe Sousa was the one person most responsible for the community center, starting in 1990 when he and Rick Dahlgren suggested the idea. Joe then followed through on the idea by developing early sketches and later by securing funding for it to be built without passing a bond or raising taxes.

“As the idea of a community center was discussed,” Spevak added, “some older adults said the center didn’t need a gym, but Joe persisted in including it, so that children and teenagers would have a place for sports and games.”

Commissioner Gargano added that as a person who has known Sousa for many years, “Joe dedicated so much of his life to his community that it’s appropriate we name the gym in his honor.”

The motion, made by Spevak and seconded by Gargano, passed unanimously. The commission’s recommendation will now be taken forward by Heim, through a city staff process and then to the city council.

Heim then presented to the commission updates on park projects. As noted in his written report, “Completed projects include the Pacheco Park Irrigation Projects, shade structures funded by the First 5 Shade Grant, and the completion of the Regency Lot D Playground.

“Active projects,” his report continued,” include the AG Sports Complex Refurbishment, Pickleball Court Construction and the Sunrise Ranch and Shaunessy Village Park constructions.

Upcoming projects including “Southpointe Basin Park, the Pump Track, Colorado Ballpark Improvements, the Vineyard B Basin parking lot, a Westside Dog Park, a Splash Pad, the Canal Trail Overlay and the submission of projects to the Statewide Park Program Grant.”

Heim also said that a series of parks public meetings will take place in November at the community center, including meetings on the Southpointe Park and pump track on November 13 and 15, and meetings on the Vineyard B Basin Parking Lot and the Westside Dog Park on Nov. 20 and 22, to which everyone in the community is invited.

The commissioners thanked Heim for his updates and in particular for specifically asking for their recommendations to be taken to the city council, similar to the way planning commission recommendations are forwarded. This has been a request of commissioners this past year, especially by Commissioner Sybil Halloran.

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How the LB Community Center came to be, thanks to determination and resilience

The Los Banos Community Center (645 Seventh St.) is the hub today for many community activities and events. People old and young use it often, ever since it opened in 2010. But most people who use the center don't know the history of how it came to be.

So, as a public service, I decided to write a column to record this history. I thought the best person to consult on this would be Joe Sousa, who served the city for many years as a leader in the public services and parks and recreation departments and later on as a city councilmember.

In talking with Joe, I learned that the development of the community center required a lot of dreams, plans, fortitude and resilience over the course of 20 years.

The idea of a community center emerged around 1990, when Joe Sousa and Rick Dahlgren (who served then as the city's public services director) started dreaming of a facility that the entire community could use and be proud of.

At that time, the place serving as a community center was the Miller and Lux Building (830 Sixth St.). But this facility had limited space (seating a maximum of 100) and had only on-street parking nearby.

What was needed was a much larger building that could accommodate the needs and desires of people of all ages -- from children to senior citizens and everyone in between, as well as ample parking space. It was a terrific dream in 1990, but unfortunately there was no land on which to build a community center and no money to build it.

It took a variety of events, some good fortune and a lot of determination over the next 20 years to make the dream a reality.

First, in the mid-1990s, the city received a large donation of land from the railroad company that used to serve Los Banos. The land includes what is now the Rails to Trails path that crosses diagonally through town plus a large parcel of land on which the community center is now located.

This provided enough hope for Dahlgren and Sousa to create their own sketches for what a center might look like, including a large banquet room and a commercial-sized kitchen, a gym which could be used especially by young people, various rooms for activities and meetings, an entryway where parks and recreation staff could greet the public, a large inner courtyard where outdoor events and activities could be held and a barbecue area.

But there was still no money to build it. Then came some more good fortune through something called RDA.

In the second half of the 20th century and into the first decade of the 21st century, the State of California created Regional Development Agencies (or RDAs), which enabled cities to use some of the collected state property taxes for local use in areas that needed redevelopment. The area where the community center is now located qualified for RDA funds.

In 2008 Los Banos had the opportunity to use those funds, and the city council voted to use the money to build a community center. For people who had long wanted and dreamed of a Los Banos community center, this was the opportunity. However, there were others that opposed it, saying such a center would be a future burden to the city.

At the same time, because these were regional funds, the collected state tax money could be claimed by the county if the city didn't act quickly.

At a city council meeting in 2008, a resolution authorizing the use of RDA funds for a community center passed the council—barely, by a 3-2 vote, with Mayor Tommy Jones, Councilmember Elizabeth Stone and Councilmember Joe Sousa voting yes.

There was one catch. Any project using RDA funds had to be built quickly on time and on budget.

Fortunately, the informal sketches that Dahlgren and Sousa created could be quickly turned into architectural drawings. City staff moved expeditiously with an architect and a construction firm.

A groundbreaking was held in 2009 and by 2010 the center was completed. By moving so quickly, the city was able to save considerable dollars on construction costs. The timing was fortuitous, because in 2011 RDAs were disbanded and the money in RDA funds went elsewhere.

The detailed plans for the community center had everything the city needed: a "Grand Room" with an adjoining kitchen, a multi-purpose gym, an arts and crafts room, a lounge (that also serves a meeting room), a fitness room, a barbecue area, a large entry lobby and a spacious outdoor courtyard. And there was plenty of room for parking.

In the process of developing architectural drawings, another controversy developed. Some senior citizen residents, who were happy with the grand room and the kitchen, were unhappy that a gym would be part of the complex. But others, especially Joe Sousa, won the day, saying that young people needed to be a part of the community center as much as seniors and other adults. As a result, the gym became an essential part of the center.

By the time the community center opened, the Henry Miller Plaza was also complete, featuring a sculpture of Henry Miller on a horse along with cattle. This was also part of Joe Sousa's dream, made possible by another grant the city received. It was Joe who created the initial sketches of the sculpture. In the end the City of Los Banos had a community center and a plaza to be proud of, without having to pass a bond or increase taxes. And now in 2025 the center is used by hundreds of people, young and old, every week, practically every day.

As a longtime resident of Los Banos, I'm proud of the Los Banos Community Center and the Henry Miller Plaza, and I'm grateful that Joe Sousa dedicated so much time and effort to make this all happen.

And, having watched my grandchildren in sporting events in the multi-purpose gym, I appreciate Joe's determination to make the gym an essential part of the complex.

John Spevak's email is [REDACTED]