

# Built to Burn?

## Emergency Access Challenges on Humboldt Hill

Released July 30th, 2025

### SUMMARY

In light of the recent tragic wildfires in Southern California, the Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury investigated the wildfire situation in one of our local communities. The County has done extensive planning in this regard and issued Humboldt County's Community Wildfire Protection Plan in 2019. The plan identified several areas in the county where there is only one ingress/egress route that could become critical choke points should an emergency evacuation be required. This could result in emergency equipment being unable to reach the fire and/or fatalities as fleeing residents are overcome by the fire.

The plan listed the following areas with significant populations that are of concern:

- Humboldt Hill
- Upper Jacoby Creek
- Liscomb Hill
- End of Ridgewood Drive
- Neighborhoods along Mitchell, Mitchell Heights, Spears, and Pigeon Point Roads and their associated offshoots
- Other dead-end roads to Wildland-Urban Interface neighborhoods in the greater Eureka area, and the greater Arcata area

All of these areas have only one way in and one way out of the community. In the event of a large-scale wildfire this could result in significant difficulty during evacuation.

The Wildfire Protection Plan makes two major recommendations for people living in these types of areas. The first is to form a local neighborhood fire safety group operating under the auspices of the Humboldt County Fire Safe Council. The Council will assist the local fire safety groups by producing a site-specific wildfire risk assessment, an action planning process, and an annual community educational event.

The second major recommendation of the plan is for residents to sign up for Humboldt Alert, the County's Mass Notification System. Because these areas have only one road in and out, the County recommends residents listen carefully for emergency alerts and **"...have a plan and to evacuate early, if possible."**

However, in addition to these actions, there are also other potential solutions in the form of new emergency evacuation routes. One solution, which has been implemented in the Santa Cruz Mountains of Santa Clara County, is to repurpose existing utility easements as emergency access roads. The Humboldt Bay Community Services District owns multiple easements on Humboldt Hill, and with some additional grading work some of these could potentially be linked up to form an emergency egress route.

Under State regulations, any new developments on Humboldt Hill must include a secondary access road. If there isn't an existing road, the developer will have to construct one. As a condition for permitting, the Humboldt County Planning Department requires new developments to open their private access road as a secondary evacuation route for all residents of Humboldt Hill during emergencies.

There is currently a small-scale development project under way at the top of Humboldt Hill that has provisionally completed the permitting process started in 2018. Assuming the project and its associated secondary road is eventually completed, the residents of Humboldt Hill will finally have an additional evacuation route in the case of emergency.

The Grand Jury focused on Humboldt Hill because it is the area designated by the Humboldt County's Community Wildfire Protection Plan that has the largest number of both structures and residents. We believe the approaches discussed in this report can potentially serve as a model for other areas in the County which do not currently have a secondary emergency egress route.

## **GLOSSARY**

|         |                                                                                         |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CWPP    | Community Wildfire Protection Plan                                                      |
| FSC     | Humboldt County Fire Safe Council                                                       |
| HOA     | Home Owner's Association                                                                |
| Ingress | Right or permission to enter an area, typically via a public road or a private easement |
| Egress  | Right or permission to exit an area, typically via a public road or a private easement  |

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with several individuals with historical and current knowledge of real estate development, attempts at development and physical resources on Humboldt Hill.

The Grand Jury reviewed documents pertaining to easements, obstacles to road development and assessments of dangers causing egress problems. The most relevant information is listed in the appendix at the end of this report.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Ingress and Egress Roads**

The Grand Jury first studied a Humboldt Hill subdivision originally known as Country Club Estates to find out about alternative ingress and egress routes. The original Country Club Estates development was started in 1952 with approximately 63 parcels. The Grand Jury learned from some of the longtime residents in the development that a "handshake deal" was made between the County and the developer regarding a secondary access road that would connect the development to Tompkins Hill Road. Regardless of the veracity of the story, no road was ever completed.

In 2009 the Board of Supervisors agreed to extend Humboldt Hill Road to Tompkins Hill Road. The Public Works director and Community Development Services director informed the Board of Supervisors of the need to create a secondary access road which was part of the 1995 Eureka Community Plan.

However, some residents on Humboldt Hill did not want the road extension because they argued this would open the area on the south side of Humboldt Hill to development, which proved to be accurate.

A key element of the plan to extend Humboldt Hill Road to Tompkins Hill Road was a 400-parcel development on the south side of Humboldt Hill. The development would have provided emergency egress to all residents of Humboldt Hill via a new road through the subdivision.

The development was going to be located completely outside of the coastal zone. However, there was a non-developed section of the property that was located inside the coastal zone. This gave the California Coastal Commission authority to review the development, and they ended up opposing the project using public concerns as their rationale.

Public concerns cited by the Coastal Commission included: increased traffic, increased crime, impacts on agricultural land, impacts on wildlife, geological impacts, and the incomplete consideration of alternate secondary routes. This opposition ultimately torpedoed the project, largely because the mitigation requirements demanded by the Coastal Commission were deemed unworkable.

Another reason for having a secondary access road is that Highway 101 below Humboldt Hill sits in a liquefaction zone. If 101 becomes impassable in this area due to a major earthquake, there is no reasonable alternative route to the southern portion of the county.

An additional concern raised by residents was the issue of vegetation management after seeing the consequences of the 2018 Paradise fire. Residents are responsible for clearing vegetation to create defensible space around their homes. The fire department routinely inspects the area to ensure proper emergency vehicle access and confirm that fire hydrants are present and functional.

The Humboldt Community Services District has easements on Humboldt Hill that could provide an opportunity for emergency egress, and we learned that one of these easements could potentially connect to Bell Hill Road. It is not paved and is in very rough shape, but with some grading work it could serve as an emergency evacuation route.

Another consequence of not having a secondary evacuation route is that obtaining fire insurance is sometimes problematic for residents.

## **Fire Safe Councils**

California has a statewide Fire Safe Council (FSC) that encourages and assists local communities to form their own FSCs. Local councils are normally nonprofit organizations used to source grants (typically for cities or towns) to address open space fuel mitigation as well as home wildfire resiliency. Nonprofit status is not required, but many of the grants have nonprofit requirements. Fire Safe Councils also function as the City's umbrella for wildfire prevention.

Humboldt County has a Fire Safe Council that provides support to local communities interested in becoming nationally recognized Firewise Communities (described below). Presently the five local Fire Safe Councils active in the county are:

- Lower Mattole
- Southern Humboldt
- Van Duzen
- Willow Creek
- Orleans/Somes Bar

Humboldt Hill does not have a Fire Safe Council.

Some FSCs develop their own local Community Wildlife Protection Plan (CWPP). Others choose to use their area's Planning Unit Action Plan (Part 4 of the countywide CWPP) as their guiding document. FSCs also often organize events focused on informing their community about wildfire preparedness.

## **Firewise Communities**

Firewise USA® is a federal program that deals directly with Home Owner's Associations (HOA) and communities to get them recognized by the National Fire Protection Association as a Firewise Community. This designation brings benefits to the communities. Firewise Communities do not need any formal legal status; however, many HOAs are registered as a nonprofit.

Benefits of being a Firewise Community include:

- educating people living in the Wildland-Urban interface on how to adapt to living with wildfire before it occurs
- empowering communities with tools and resources that reduce wildfire risk
- encouraging neighbors to work together to minimize home loss to wildfire
- the ability to apply for specialized grants

The process of becoming a Firewise Community starts with organizing. A community creates a board or committee of volunteers to represent the community, including residents and partners such as local forestry agencies or the fire department. Then a resident leader is identified who will be the program point of contact. For the Humboldt Hill area, the fire department the residents would work with is Humboldt Bay Fire. Humboldt Bay Fire has been engaged in working with Humboldt Hill residents for many years, but the citizens have yet to form a Firewise Community.

Active Firewise Communities in Humboldt County are:

- Willow Creek
- Orleans
- Shelter Cove
- Honeydew
- Kneeland
- Petrolia
- Redwood Valley/Chezem
- Salmon Creek
- Benbow
- Garberville
- Etnahouse

Humboldt Hill is not a Firewise Community.

## **DISCUSSION**

## Access

It is of critical importance that secondary access be developed for residents of Humboldt Hill. Ideally, access would be achieved by developing new public roads. Unfortunately, this is no easy task - it has been tried multiple times over the years and has met with failure every time. More immediately, emergency access could be achieved by using existing public utility easements or roads that cross private property.

Some of the difficulties in finding a solution include:

- There was a prospective new subdivision that could have provided a secondary road, but California Coastal Commission mitigation requirements made the project infeasible, and the development was not completed.
- Local residents identified various roads that could potentially be used in an emergency, but none are sanctioned for public use.
- Utilities on Humboldt Hill have various easements that also might be used but, again, none are official.

We identified a small, proposed development at the top of Humboldt Hill that may provide a solution. As a condition of permitting, a secondary road must be constructed and open to access by all residents of Humboldt Hill during an emergency. If this development is completed as planned, it would finally provide an emergency egress route for residents on Humboldt Hill. Regarding completion, it should be noted that this development has been in the planning stage since December of 2018.

There is some hope that this project may actually be completed because the California Coastal Commission is not a factor. When the Humboldt County Planning Department made its recommendation to the Planning Commission to approve the project they stated: "Project is NOT appealable to the California Coastal Commission." (emphasis in the original document)

## Fire Safety

Regardless of whether or not there are adequate access roads, fire safety is always a concern.

The Grand Jury reviewed the 2019 Humboldt County Community Wildfire Protection Plan to determine what remedies are suggested in the plan in the event of an emergency. The plan identified various areas in the County, including Humboldt Hill, that face the same problem and recommended that residents:

- Work with the County Office of Emergency Services, local fire service, and law enforcement to engage community members in evacuation preparedness. Work together to review best practices as well as emerging new approaches.
- Identify local community liaisons to work directly with emergency management officials.
- Identify and map local evacuation routes and sites.
- Develop an evacuation program specifically for seniors and disabled persons.
- Notify the community of evacuation center locations.
- Provide information on large animal evacuation.
- Host neighborhood evacuation preparedness block parties.

The Plan also recommended that: "...when new subdivisions are created within those areas, it should be a priority to include development of secondary access routes."

## CONCLUSION

The wildfire evacuation risks in Humboldt Hill and similar areas with only one road in and out are serious. Citizens need to understand the danger and work together to find solutions.

The Grand Jury urges the County to facilitate establishing secondary access. This can be achieved either by using existing utility easements as potential emergency egress roads and/or encouraging the completion of the proposed development at the top of Humboldt Hill.

Whether a secondary egress road is built or not, the Grand Jury urges residents to form local Firewise Communities and to enroll in emergency alert systems to improve community preparedness.

## FINDINGS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury finds that:

**F1:** Residents of Humboldt Hill have not organized a Fire Safe Council or a Firewise Community to educate themselves and to prepare for possible wildfires or other environmental emergencies therefore leaving themselves vulnerable to potential harm. **(R1, R2)**

**F2:** There is no secondary emergency evacuation route available to the residents of Humboldt Hill, leaving them open to harm in case of wildfire, earthquake, or other emergencies. **(R3)**

**F3:** The latest proposed subdivision on Humboldt Hill includes a secondary access route open to residents in case of emergency. If completed as planned, this would provide improved safety for residents of Humboldt Hill. **(R4)**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

**R1:** The Humboldt No. 1 Fire Protection District Board of Directors direct the Chief of Humboldt Bay Fire to continue to work with residents of Humboldt Hill to develop a local Fire Safe Council. **(F1)**

**R2:** The Humboldt No. 1 Fire Protection District Board of Directors direct the Chief of Humboldt Bay Fire to continue to work with residents of Humboldt Hill to develop a local Firewise Community. **(F1)**

**R3:** The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors schedule and participate in negotiations with private landowners and/or public utilities in order to grant emergency access to Humboldt Hill residents across their property and/or easements. This will be completed by no later than September 30, 2025. **(F2)**

**R4:** The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors direct the Planning & Building Department Director and relevant staff to expedite the completion of the latest subdivision plan in order to grant emergency access to Humboldt Hill residents. **(F3)**

## RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, each entity or individual named below must respond to the enumerated Findings and Recommendations within specific statutory guidelines.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- The respondent agrees with the finding; or
- The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action; or
- The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation; or
- The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency where applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of the publication of the Grand Jury report; or
- The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

### REQUIRED RESPONSE – WITHIN 90 DAYS

The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors  
**(F2, F3) and (R3, R4)**

The Humboldt No. 1 Fire Protection District Board of Directors  
**(F1) and (R1, R2)**

### Invited Responses

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury also invites the following entities or individuals to respond.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)  
**(F1) and (R1, R2)**

The Humboldt Community Services District  
**(F2) and (R2)**

Responses are to be sent to:

The Honorable Judge Kelly L. Neel  
Humboldt County Superior Court

825 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Eureka, CA 95501

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury  
P.O. Box 657  
Eureka, CA 95502 A

*Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.*

## Appendix A

Below is some information on forming Fire Safe Councils and Firewise Communities from <https://wildfirefoundation.org/fire-safe-councils-vs-firewise-communities/>

### **FIRE SAFE COUNCILS**

Administered by States such as the California Fire Safe Council

#### **Setup Requirements:**

- Nonprofit 501(c)3 (recommended)
- Wildfire Risk Assessment (WRA) – City / Town *(Normally completed by 3rd Party)* Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)

#### **Benefits:**

- Assists in the protection of Life, Home, and Property
- A recognized entity that represents a city or town and acts as a central hub for wildfire resilience activity
- Can apply for grants (many are specified for FSCs)

#### **Notes:**

- Broad purview, including open space and homes
- Connects communities with wildfire-related agencies
- Each FSC must define its boundaries as part of the Wildfire Risk Assessment, and then create a CWPP to respond to the risks defined in the WRA

#### **Estimated Setup and 1st Year Costs:**

Incorporation, WRA, CWPP, Board Insurance, Consulting

#### **Estimated Annual Costs:**

Tax filings, WRA updates every 3 years, Consulting  
Board Insurance

#### **Ongoing Requirements:**

- Recommended every 3 years
- Nonprofit must file annual Federal and State returns

## **FIREWISE COMMUNITIES**

Administered by NFPA®

### **Setup Requirements:**

- Board/Committee (no formal organization)
- 8-2,500 homes/dwellings maximum (CAL FIRE prefers maximum 500)
- Community Risk Assessment (CRA) – HOA or Community  
(Normally completed by local Fire Department)
- 3-year Action Plan
- Hours, Materials, Dollars, and Yard Vegetation Tracking System
  - 1 hour per year per residence of volunteer hours
  - Current California rate of 1 hour = \$31.80
  - Yard Vegetation is measured and tracked in Cubic Yards

### **Benefits:**

- Assists in the protection of Life, Homes, and Property
- Provides data that become action plans for a safer community
- Free (currently) Home Assessments  
(Normally completed by local RCD, Fire Department or locally trained assessors)
- Can increase the Firewise Community's ability to get individual home insurance and decreased rates

### **Notes:**

- Works directly with HOAs or communities
- Purview includes homes and Community's Open Space only
- Each Community must define its boundaries as part of their CRA, and produce a 3-year plan responding to their CRA defined risks

### **Estimated Setup and 1st Year Costs:**

Website, CRM, WRA, 3-year Action Plan, Consulting

### **Estimated Annual Costs: (Shared)**

Website Hosting, CRM, Other software, IT Support

### **Ongoing Requirements:**

- Annual renewal to maintain status: Board updates, 3-year action plans, Vegetation removal, Risk Reduction Investment (Volunteer hours and Money Spent)
- WRA updated minimum every 5 years