

Marin Independent Journal

Marin Voice: California growth mandates in fire hazard zones must stop



Crews from Central Marin, Mill Valley and Marin County fire departments work the scene of a wildfire on Kite Hill off Camino Alto in Mill Valley on Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2022. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

By **JOHN MCCAULEY** PUBLISHED: February 7, 2025 at 12:57 PM PST

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Given recent tragic wildfires in Los Angeles and Maui, fire danger is naturally on everyone's mind. Evacuation readiness planning was a top priority during the nine years I served on the Mill Valley City Council.

In its zeal to promote more housing, the California Legislature passed numerous laws taking away local control of housing-development decisions irrespective of

fire danger. Local jurisdictions like Mill Valley must comply with new state building mandates that appear to ignore fire risk.

Working with Google researchers, Mill Valley officials participated in a groundbreaking simulation of [a full evacuation](#) of all greater city and county families living west of Highway 101. Actual street configurations and garage locations were used. This work was published in a peer-reviewed academic journal in 2023.

There is a sobering impact in understanding specific evacuation times, which vary greatly by neighborhood. Although we have indisputable data for Mill Valley, this is an issue for all communities in California with housing in zones with high fire risk and challenging evacuation routes.

The researchers and city officials developed a detailed plan that significantly reduces evacuation time by using our freeway access points in a better way. Plans were also made to quickly and safely store many cars in the flatlands to make room for cars proceeding out of the canyons.

For details, review the Oct. 16, 2023 City Council [meeting video](#) on Mill Valley's website. Great progress has already been made, including repositioning tools necessary to implement the plan. Another citywide drill is scheduled for April 26.

Wildfires are unpredictable. No amount of planning can mitigate every scenario. The simulation predicts that most families will be in their cars within an hour of the start of a massive event. At the two-hour mark, the simulation predicts that 78% of all cars in the 17,000-car "greater Mill Valley area" will reach a safer location due to much better traffic planning. This is a significant improvement from the baseline. However, three neighborhoods still achieve a much slower result.

About 1,500 of the 3,300 cars (along with their occupants) in the combined neighborhoods of Cascade, Summit and Warner Canyon would not be expected to reach a safer area within two hours. These neighborhoods represent only 20% of the total car population, but 42% of the remaining cars that are at higher risk. These neighborhoods have greater density of cars, challenging road conditions and are farther up in the canyons, in high fire hazard severity zones.

While existing conditions are difficult to change, common sense would suggest that these three areas are the last place to expand housing, making things worse.

Irrespective of the fire danger conditions present, new state law allows up to four units on any single-family zoned lot, originally zoned for one unit only. Each new unit adds more lives and cars attempting a possibly life-threatening exit from the neighborhoods least able to cope with evacuation.

The way housing-mandate laws are written now, no city in California can stop a proposed development in high fire areas for fire safety considerations.

Enough is enough. Now is the time to demand that all California jurisdictions be given greater discretion over building in high fire zones. The state cannot continue to ignore the consequences of it providing incentives to build in these higher risk areas. It is time for the state to better balance growth with safety.

I am promoting this call to action as a person committed to expanding the diversity in housing, but placed in the right locations. I was proud when I was in office to advocate the One Hamilton Project, a 45-unit development of low-income rental housing.

Please join me in calling on the Marin Board of Supervisors, state Sen. Mark McGuire and Assemblymember Damon Connolly to advocate for allowing local jurisdictions to override our state-mandated building codes regarding development levels in high fire risk zones. Please sign the petition found at chng.it/rzDwj56VWS to make your voice heard.

SIGN THE PETITION

This is just common sense. We can no longer ignore the real-world consequences of promoting housing growth at all costs, ignoring the impacts on the safety of our citizens.

John McCauley is a former member of the Mill Valley City Council.