

Where Should a New Cell Tower Go?

by Laurie Guitteau and Alex Feldwinn

After learning that Verizon proposed placing a cell phone tower in the Botanic Garden, one canyon resident told MCA, "Verizon wants to improve the teleco infrastructure in our town. That's great, what's the downside? Don't make it difficult for them." But Judi Doernberg, whose lives close to the target location, wrote in answer to an MCA survey, "We already have AT&T cell towers in the hills that Verizon can piggyback onto." In fact, her comment was echoed by roughly two dozen neighbors who attended MCA's September board meeting, all of whom were concerned about the potential cell tower location and what it might mean for their views, property values, and, possibly, their health.

Two years ago Verizon offered to pay the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden \$20,000 to install a cell tower on their property. The first response was a quick "no," with Steve Windhager, executive director for the Garden, saying that a fake palm or pine tree just wasn't in keeping with the Garden's mission of conserving native plants. But after several requests, Windhager told Verizon he would discuss the idea with the Mission Canyon Association. This led to a Verizon presentation to the MCA Board of Directors where the idea of the tower was couched in fire safety terms. After much quizzing, Verizon's rep agreed to raise a truck boom on the location to demonstrate more-or-less how tall the tower would be. Yikes! It was big, and it was disturbing.

During this discussion, Judi Doernberg became understandably concerned and alerted her neighbors. The result was a roomful of neighbors who became involved in this issue, did their own research, and asked excellent questions at MCA's September board meeting. Though the Verizon rep bowed out at the last minute, Captain Rob Hazard of S.B. County Fire was on hand, and he explained that though firefighters do use Verizon for both official and unofficial business, the lack of good coverage is not a safety issue. He even drove the canyon's roads later and checked the Verizon signal. He reported back

that coverage was good on the main roads except for a very few places.

Before making a decision, MCA sought to understand the dimension of the problem by sending out a survey to all canyon residents for whom we have email addresses. (If you want to be added to MCA's email list, please write to webmaster@missioncanyon.org.) Of the roughly 700 surveys sent, 224 people filled one out, and a number of people also sent in additional comments. The survey revealed that Verizon was the dominant carrier in the canyon with just over 50 percent of the service, followed by AT&T with a little over 38 percent. Most of the cell phones in the survey were "smart phones," the lion's share being iPhones.

The results of the survey were well distributed geographically throughout the canyon, with no particular area dominating the results.

When asked to rate, on a scale of 1 (very easy) to 5 (very difficult), making cell phone calls at home, the results were as follows:

Very easy:	1	79	36.2%
	2	24	11%
	3	24	11%
	4	29	13.3%
Very difficult:	5	44	20.2%

Regarding variations in cell phone signal at home during the day, 59 percent said there was none, and 27 percent were very frustrated that it varied. When asked about reception when moving around the canyon, "very easy" had the largest response, 25 percent, with a fairly even spread between "easy" and "very difficult."

There was a similar result when the survey asked about problems with cell phone reception varying by street or neighborhood. "Very frustrated," "tolerable," and "no" each got about one-third of the response. Finally, we asked people how important better reception was, and about one-third said "not important" or "very important," with the remainder somewhere among the three choices in between.



Verizon simulated the proposed cell tower height with a truck boom.

PHOTO: Hugh Twibell

Overall, the survey results show that about half the canyon gets moderate to good reception, while the other half struggles with their service. The comments seemed to come down party lines as well, with those who have good service pleading to not let Verizon put a new tower in the canyon, while those with poor service are desperate to get some of those cell reception bars that the lucky ones already have.

We received several impassioned comments in the survey on both sides of the issue. One Verizon user with an iPhone was happy with her reception on Cheltenham, but said, "I support increasing the wireless coverage. Anyone who visits me with a different carrier gets no coverage unless they walk out into the street. Unsafe and unfriendly." Some folks on Montrose thought, "We do not need a cell tower in Mission Canyon. The cell phone reception is just fine like it is. Say no to Verizon." Another resident at the top of Tunnel Road said, "Coverage at my house is horrible. Also, I think bad coverage in the canyon is an issue in case of emergencies."

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Cell Tower (cont. from p.1)

A thinking survey-taker observed, "The Garden [isn't] the best location to serve the largest number of homes. A tower at the south end of Spyglass Ridge Road, at the very end of Tunnel or the top of Holly would be more centrally located and a much better choice since that would potentially serve the Palomino Road/Arriba Way residents as well as those on Cheltenham/Tornoe and Tun-

nel/Mission Canyon. There probably isn't any single site that will serve all homes, but there are solutions the cell phone companies can provide to customers with hard-to-reach homes."

Supported by residents, MCA voted against the cell tower in that particular location and advised Verizon to do further research to find a more acceptable location for a new cell tower. And finding a location is only the first hurdle. To place a new tower,

Verizon needs a property owner willing to lease, and then the company must go through permit applications and public hearings at the county level.

Verizon's engineers are working on finding a different way to boost their signal to customers in the canyon. If you'd like to send MCA your feedback via the survey, go to missioncanyon.org.

Fighting for Fire Protection

by Jean Yamamura and Ray Smith

Just as Mission Canyon went through planning workshops and hearings for its Design Guidelines and Community Plan, so has Eastern Goleta Valley gone through the same multi-year process. But a surprising call-out for chaparral to be named "rare" and "sensitive" in east Goleta's proposed Community Plan raised worries among the fire community that such designations would require permits for brush clearing.

Ever since a highly visible "bald spot" of over 20 acres appeared in 2006 at the top of the Santa Ynez Mountains looking down toward the 101, environmentalists have clenched their teeth over the brutal clearing in violation of watershed and brushing ordinances (which limits clearing to five acres by private parties and has additional conditions to protect water courses). To increase the penalties and add permit requirements should it happen again, the Environmental Defense Center (EDC) and Urban Creeks Council advised the east Goleta Valley planners that four varieties of chaparral should be designated environmentally sensitive habitat.

Fire officials and EDC reps met to hash out what this meant for fire prevention. County Fire Chief Eric Peterson told MCA they'd worked out an extension to 300 feet for permit-free defensible space in Eastern Goleta Valley's steeper areas, as long as County Fire gives the go-ahead, an increase from the current 100 feet that individual homeowners must clear. Further, county senior planner Julie Harris said any vegetation management or brush-clearing work that is led by a fire department, such as the fire grant work MCA has accomplished, is exempt from permit requirements. And the wording about chaparral was changed in the eastern Goleta Community Plan, Supervisor Janet Wolf said, to indicate that chaparral may contain rare or sensitive species, rather than being sensitive in and of itself.

The discussions regarding chaparral in the Eastern Goleta Valley Community Plan



A 20-acre clear-cut in the Santa Ynez range in 2006 spurred environmentalists to try to protect chaparral.

PHOTO: Google Earth/Urban Creeks Council

—which covers roughly 22,000 acres to our west, cresting at Camino Cielo Road—helped to dispel two myths. First, as clarified in the Plan's Biological Resources Report, the four vegetation types (chamise chaparral, lower montane mixed chaparral, ceanothus chaparral, and soft scrub) are not "rare." Rather, they may include rare vegetation alliances, as well as habitats for rare, endangered, or threatened species. These conditions are true for many ecosystems, but they do not form a basis for an environmentally sensitive habitat (ESH) overlay.

The chaparral discussions also helped dispel the claim made by EDC in a newspaper editorial that "chaparral actually helps reduce fire hazards." In fact, the wildfire defense zone plan written by Los Padres Forest Service for communities in the Santa Ynez range (see "Mountain Communities Plan Fire Breaks")—some of which fall in the Eastern Goleta Valley—emphasizes that a "chaparral ecosystem is considered to be one of the most fire hazardous landscapes in North America."

Fire Department folks state that "fuel conversion from chaparral to light grass results in a far safer fire condition for homes, people and firefighters. While grass may be a more flammable fuel, flammability only equates to ignitability. The flammability of grass can

be greatly reduced by mowing and weed whacking, which is not possible with chaparral. Of much greater concern is fire intensity and flame length. Chaparral fuel burns with vastly more intensity than grass and the burn duration often exceeds 30 minutes to an hour vs seconds to minutes for grass. Chaparral produces thousands of embers ahead of the flame front while grass produces no embers."

The statistics confirm these observations. "In 100 years of County fire history there are no recorded examples of a grass fire burning down a home. Since 1964 we have lost 1,298 structures in wildfires burning in chaparral fuel type. Since 1964 four firefighters and one civilian have lost their lives in chaparral wildfires burning in S.B. County, and in the 2009 Jesusita Fire alone there were six fire entrapments involving firefighters and civilians resulting in three serious injuries and over 20 moderate injuries."

Like the folks in the mountain communities, we've chosen to live in Mission Canyon because of its natural beauty, including the masses of chaparral that both threaten with their potential for hot flames and protect with their deep, drought-resistant roots. Recognizing both aspects of the plant community as well as the rural community need for fire safety has never seemed more necessary.

Get Ready for Fire Danger

by Laurie Guitteau

As one of the hottest summers on record limps to an end, Mission Canyon residents prepare for fall, which usually brings hot, high winds. Living in what is officially called the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) requires vigilance and careful preparation. Old-timers and newer residents alike can review what we all need to know and to do.

Experts agree that a structure's survival during a wildfire depends largely on its building materials and the characteristics of the fuels in its immediate surroundings. Not all of us can afford to retrofit our homes with more fire-resistant materials, but everyone can do some general housekeeping to make our properties more fire resistant.

First, trim, trim, trim. Clean dead branches and leaves from all your trees. Trim back any tree limbs close to your roof. Remove dead vegetation from ornamental plants that are close to your house. Is the road in front of your property and along your driveway clear so that fire trucks have complete access? Do you have any of that "herbaceous fuel" that needs cutting or removal? Pretend you're a wind-blown ember looking for a place to land. How much damage could you do?

Second, be sure your roof and all your gutters are clean. Some of us have roofs with uneven lines where needles and dead leaves pile up, creating a hospitable spot for a stray ember. Gutters need to be cleaned frequently. While you're looking at your roof, check any vents to be sure they are screened adequately. One house here in the canyon appeared to have come through the fire unscathed. Instead, the interior had been destroyed by fire that entered through a vent.

Take a walk around your house. Do you have flammable materials right up against the house that could be moved to a safer location? Plastic garbage containers were a culprit in the Tea Fire. Firewood is a stick of dynamite in a fire; make sure it's stacked where it won't ignite any structures. Wooden fences are another source of ignition, especially if they abut a structure. Identify all the objects that need to be moved away from your house in the event of a fire: patio furniture, flammable sun shades, bird feeders that could catch a spark. Think embers!

Decks are generally the most vulnerable part of a house because fire can get underneath. Make sure you don't make it even easier by storing flammable things under your deck or by having particularly flammable vegetation under a deck or a porch.

Our firefighters at Station 15 are your best friends. Call 681-5515 or stop by and make

an appointment to have them evaluate your property to make your home safer. We know from personal experience after the Painted Cave Fire that Station 15 can offer invaluable advice. We installed heat-sensitive sprinklers on our deck at their suggestion; those sprinklers saved our house in the Jesusita Fire.

Be sure to plan! Make sure you have a family emergency plan and that everyone in the family knows it well. Do you all know where to meet in case of an emergency? Do you have the most important documents ready to grab in a hurry? Better yet, make sure the most important documents are not even in your house; put them in a safety deposit box. Family heirlooms, jewelry, anything you have whose loss would devastate you should be kept in a safety deposit box. We have all learned from experience that once a fire starts, you may not be able to return home to get your precious belongings.

If anyone in your home is unable to move quickly for any reason, be sure that you have a plan to evacuate that person. One disabled woman died in the Valley Fire in Northern California, and many other elderly and disabled barely escaped. As we were reminded this summer, these fires can be deadly in a matter of minutes. All the houses that burned here in Mission Canyon during the Jesusita Fire did so within less than 30 minutes.

Do you have adequate fire insurance? Insurance horror stories abound. Be sure to review your policy once a year. Those folks who did lose their homes will tell you that it is expensive to rebuild here in Santa Barbara, especially if you live on any kind of a slope. Be realistic about what it would cost to rebuild and how long it will take.

And if the fire comes, evacuate early. Mission Canyon is a rabbit warren of narrow, twisting streets, many of them dead ends. Imagine navigating them in dense smoke with 100-foot flames behind you. Imagine everyone trying to get out as the fire trucks try to get in. A resident almost went over a steep bank on the road he had driven for over 50 years because he waited too long and was surrounded by smoke and flames. During the Jesusita Fire, firefighters were put in danger because some residents refused to evacuate. Lives matter most!

Educate yourself. The Santa Barbara County Fire website has even more detailed suggestions for preparing your house and your family at sbcfire.com. We all live in the canyon because we love the natural beauty. As a community, we must do what we can to protect it and ourselves.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Nextdoor

During the Verizon cell tower debate, residents in the neighborhood got in touch with one another using an Internet social site called Nextdoor. It's a great communication tool for issues, safety, and even items for sale, they say, with about 275 neighbors signed up already. To join, you need to confirm your address; Nextdoor sends a postcard or you can have a neighbor invite you or vouch for you. Go to missioncanyon.org, or nextdoor.com for more.

Saving Water at the Garden

Construction continues on the Pritzlaff Conservation Center as concrete walls and steel supports rise along the east side of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. Along the west side, a trench holds three 15,000-gallon cisterns to collect rainwater and channel it to the 40,000-gallon irrigation tank that sits below Mission Canyon Road and provides much of the water for the Garden's plants.

A rainwater tank also makes up part of the new home demonstration garden to be finished in early 2016. Already a permeable quarter-inch gravel-set-in-resin pathway circles the cottage headquarters of Garden administrators. A dry creek and "rain garden" are planned, which focus on beautiful yet drought-tolerant natives. The dry creek will also receive water coming from a demonstration gray-water system.

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†MHTA (Mission Historic Trails Assoc.) has replaced Safe Passage.

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MCA's Board of Directors meets the first Tuesday of each month, at 7:30 p.m., at the S.B. Natural History Museum's MacVeagh House. All residents are welcome to attend.



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Cell Tower SNAFU Fire Prep Time!

Mountain Communities Plan Fire Breaks

by Jean Yamamura

The next big burn worries everyone these days, no one more than those who've already lived through one. This month, the Forest Service completed a vegetation management plan for the mountain communities in the Santa Ynez range, which had the Paint Fire sweep through in 1990 and the Gap Fire in 2008. The Mission Canyon Association applauds these planned fire breaks because lessening the fire dangers to our west can only help protect downwind areas.

Los Padres National Forest's plan is to create fuel breaks near Painted Cave, San Marcos Trout Club, Rosario Park, the Haney Tract, Refugio, and Gaviota. The work would be done mostly along existing roads or areas where former fuel breaks had been constructed and ranges between 280 and 500 feet wide across a total of 418 acres. With the goals of saving lives and limiting a loss of property, the plan recognizes that fire is a natural part of the mountain ecology. One of its methods would encourage younger, less flammable growth near communities and remove older undergrowth over several years. The plan, written by Los Padres' Santa Barbara Ranger District, would reduce vegetation such that flame lengths are short enough—8 feet or less—to be survivable for firefighters during a wildfire.



Firebreak treatment areas (thick red lines, left to right): Gaviota/Refugio Canyon, Rosario Park, Haney Tract West, Haney Tract East, San Marcos Trout Club, and Painted Cave

SOURCE: U.S. Forest Service

The Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zones Project would provide the mountain communities and firefighters with an added level of protection during evacuation or sheltering in place if that becomes necessary, and it allows brush work to be done in the National Forest near the vulnerable communities. Mission Canyon's own wildfire plan (which can be found at missioncanyon.org under our News Archives) can give homeowners some insight into the complex ecology of the wildlands we live near and how fire affects all our lives.