

Outdoors

in Orange County

Friends of Harbors, Beaches, & Parks Winter 2013

Claire Schlotterbeck

Zoned For Destruction?

By: Claire Schlotterbeck

If you live in or near wildlands and have experienced a fire there, you soon become an amateur weatherman. You learn that you are most vulnerable on days with high winds, high temperatures, and low humidity (that siphons moisture from plants). And you have also learned that fire season is no longer confined to the dry summer months, instead, it is year 'round. Additionally, as climate change impacts are felt, fire frequency will increase as will extreme weather events. Because you know this, you wonder why decision makers keep approving houses deeper and deeper into the rural areas of the county.

With much of the flatlands nearly built out in Orange County, developers have set their sights on building in steep rural canyons served by winding two lane roads. They often plan sites as if they were "Columbus acres"—thinking the entire world is flat. Infrastructure costs are high so the builders level the ridgelines to increase density and create pads with views. Often developers are not required to improve those two lane roads because the costs are considered too "burdensome."

This typical planning scenario escalates the danger for existing and future residents for two main reasons. First, most fires in our area are human-caused and they start in canyon bottoms, where the roads are, and then race uphill putting ridge top houses at risk. Most natural fires (lightning strikes) ignite at ridge tops and progress more slowly downhill. Second, ridge top developments are often touted as new buffers for older communities, but in reality these ridge top developments not only become additional ignition and fuel sources, but they also increase the wildland-urban interface (where nature and houses meet). Two case studies illustrate the dangers of increasing the wildland-urban interface.

Santiago Fire

The October 2007 Santiago Fire Siege was started by an arsonist near Santiago Canyon Road and Silverado Canyon Road, east of Irvine Lake. Other Southland fires already

strained available fire fighting resources so Orange County Fire Authority learned early on that they were on their own fighting this local blaze in unpredictable and hazardous conditions. They also learned that it was too windy for fire fighters to use fixed winged aircraft for aerial suppression.

There were a number of complex challenges during this fire that made it extremely difficult to gain the upper hand. According to the After Action Report, these challenges included prolonged and extreme weather conditions, rapid fire spread due to high winds and dry brush, spot fires started by embers far ahead of the flame front, large scale evacuations of residents and their animals, and the protection of older structures in residential communities adjacent to wildlands. Additionally, residents reported many homes were left unprotected because fire fighters refused to go into dangerous box canyons.

Ultimately this fire burned 28,517 acres with a total of 56 structures damaged or destroyed. Other losses included cars, orchards, landscaping, smoke damage and lost wages. After the fire was put out, efforts began to protect burned areas from flood and mudslide dangers related to winter rains. This marked a change for the County of Orange who took on the new role, cost and liability of teaching residents how to deploy sand bags to protect their canyon properties.

...continued below fold



Bob Hunt

Santiago Fire

Freeway Complex Fire

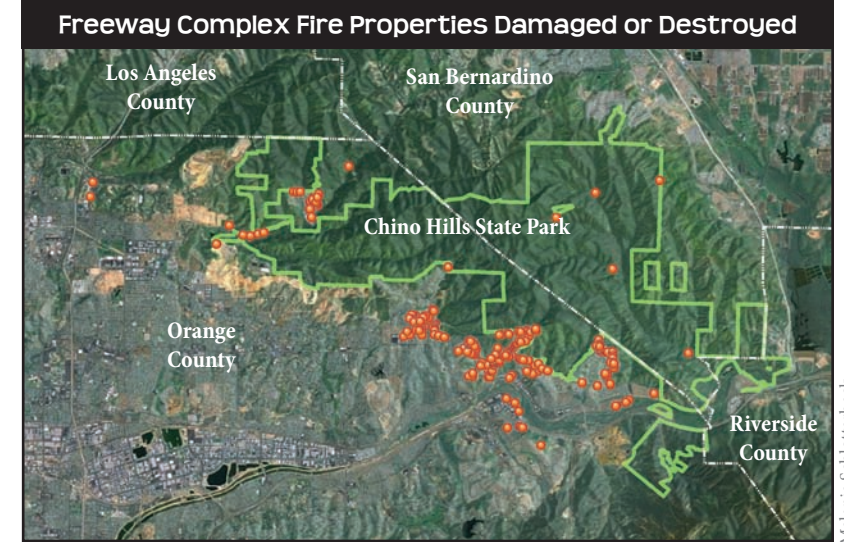
On a hot, dry and windy November morning in 2008, a vehicle ignited brush near the Green River exit along the 91 freeway in Corona. Almost two hours later another fire started eight miles northeast in Brea. Again, fire fighting resources were already stretched thin because of other fires in Southern California. With the aid of capricious winds, over the next 24 hours the two fires merged into the Freeway Complex Fire.

Nearly 300 homes and buildings were damaged or destroyed and 95% of Chino Hills State Park burned. With the fast moving flames and the closure of the 91 and 57 freeways, residents in Yorba Linda faced complete gridlock as they self-evacuated. Some residents reported it was safer and faster to evacuate on foot because of the traffic, while others reported that they nearly burned to death in their cars. This same evacuation gridlock also kept fire fighters from getting in. The main arterials proved they could not accommodate a massive and simultaneous evacuation from the hills during the fire.

After evaluating this fire storm, officials realized there were many things that went wrong during the Freeway Complex Fire. First, a secondary (emergency) evacuation route was blocked because no one had a key to the locked gate. Second, a booster pump station shutdown due to the heat thereby depriving fire fighters of water. Third, fire suppression efforts couldn't keep up with the fire's ember storm which was carried by 60 mile per hour winds. In fact, many of the houses that were burned were actually on the interior of the community as opposed to the edge nearest the burning wildlands. These relentless embers got into attics or were sucked in through running air conditioners subsequently burning the house down. Sometimes this occurred many hours after the flame front passed. At one point, the fire was spreading so fast it advanced 14 football fields a minute. Luckily no one died.



Freeway Complex Fire



Melanie Schlotterbeck

Lessons Learned

Emerging studies by fire scientists are breaking down stubborn myths. Reducing fire risk in our area usually focuses on fuel reduction which has resulted in the loss of our native chaparral and coastal sage scrub. There are two problems with this. When native vegetation is removed, non-native grasses flourish. These dry sooner, ignite easier and spread fire faster than native vegetation. Additionally, cleared areas and fire breaks, have proven to be ineffective in Santa Ana wind conditions unless fire fighters, at great risk, are present on the fuel break. After all, the Freeway Complex Fire jumped the 14 lane wide 91 (Riverside) Freeway.

Fire resistant building construction is another focal point for reducing risk. Many of the homes in Orange County's canyon and foothill areas have been there a long time, long before we knew better. Individual homeowners in those areas must accept responsibility for reducing the risk to their homes: removing ladder fuels, installing a fire resistant roof and vents, clearing leaf debris in gutters, etc. For newer homes boxed eaves, and sprinklers (in the attic) can also help. But preventative measures are only as strong as the weakest link. Fuel modification zones get overgrown. Leaf debris left on a tile roof can smolder into flame when fanned by winds. A window accidentally left open can ignite a house that then ignites other houses.

Rarely is wiser land use planning discussed as a way to reduce fire risk. Common sense and repeated catastrophic fires should have taught us that adding more houses deep in wildlands is simply irresponsible. Nevertheless, various jurisdictions are processing housing proposals that would place hundreds of more houses in steep terrain with limited access in known fire and wind corridors: Saddle Crest, Holtz Ranch, Sky Ridge, Cielo Vista, Esperanza Hills and Madrona.

Fire scientists at USGS have demonstrated that the best predictor of where the next fire will occur is where it has burned before.

Residents learned valuable lessons from both the Santiago Canyon Fire and the Freeway Complex Fire. Let's hope decision makers don't need another teachable moment.

Election Results



Fullerton's Measure W - PASSED

By: Angela Lindstrom

Measure W was the people's referendum on the 2011 Fullerton City Council's approval of Chevron-Pacific Coast Home's development proposal for West Coyote Hills. This measure targeted the Development Agreement which would have granted Chevron entitlements to build 760 houses and a shopping center on the site. Fullerton voters resoundingly voted 60.8% against Chevron's development plan for West Coyote Hills. All the years of educating the community on this issue paid off. The voters echoed their desire and vision to save all 510 acres of West Coyote Hills as a nature park and preserve.

Laguna's Measure CC - FAILED

By: Norm Grossman

An attempt by local environmentalists to secure continuing funding for the purchase of open space in Laguna Beach went down to defeat in the November election. Measure CC was a proposal to add a \$120 parcel tax for 20 years to generate approximately \$1 million per year to preserve important undeveloped lands within the City. Proponents of the measure, including Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., Village Laguna, Laguna Canyon Conservancy and other community groups, had hoped that Laguna voters would continue their long standing support of providing funding for open space. Unfortunately, a combination of a recovering economy and a small, but well-funded and vocal opposition, created enough doubt to defeat the effort.

Orange's Measure FF - PASSED

By: Theresa Sears

City park plans state Orange is severely short on parkland. Two properties, Ridgeline and Sully Miller are the last major open space parcels threatened by development. In 2011, the City Council changed Ridgeline's open space designation and then supported an estate development there with no plan to replace the lost recreational opportunities. The same developers also own the Sully Miller site which has historically been considered permanent open space, and now they want to build high-density housing there. Local volunteers collected the needed referendum signatures required to put the issue on the ballot. The No on FF campaign was successful getting 56.4% of the vote to not lose open space without an adequate plan to replace the open space.

City Efforts to Go Green



Dana Point

Dana Point is one of the few Orange County cities that has taken a stand against both the dreaded plastic bag and Styrofoam and launched its own zero-waste campaign. To reduce waste the City has also incorporated an environmental purchasing policy. For residents and businesses the City has adopted a flat rate fee for the installation of PV cells for solar energy. They've also created interpretive programs focused on tidal resources and a comprehensive water quality program that includes 18 diversions on the coastline. The City itself is requiring a "green" roof on the Sea Terrace Park maintenance building to complement the solar panels on the nature and community centers.

Huntington Beach

The City's approach to adopting a form-based code specific plan to revitalize two transportation corridors (Beach and Edinger) in Huntington Beach was awarded recognition by the Orange County Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA) and the California Chapter of the APA for the project's streamlined approval process and incorporation of mixed use developments. The City has also added sustainable features in its specific plans and projects including LEED standards, water efficiency, energy efficiency, and materials and resources. In addition, Huntington Beach has a long-standing commitment to the environment, demonstrated by its 40 year old Environmental Board which advises the City Council on environmental threats and opportunities.

San Clemente

San Clemente is in the process of updating its General Plan and will have two new sections that will improve the community immensely. First, the City incorporated a Health & Wellness section that focuses on livable communities and features that promote walkability. Second, the City Council has already adopted a Sustainability Action Plan with meaningful public input that creates a road map and timeline to incorporate green opportunities and actions in a work plan. The City has taken significant action on a host of other sustainable topics such as diverting 65% of solid waste (with an initial goal of 75%) and developing a Climate Action Plan as part of the General Plan. The City has achieved a 30% energy savings by installing 11 HVAC units and switching the lights to LED at city facilities.

Friends of Harbors, Beaches, and Parks (FHBP) works to protect the natural lands, waterways, and beaches of Orange County. Learn more at: www.FHBP.org



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www.facebook.com/FriendsofHBP

Don Thomas (1933 - 2013)



Manny Kiesser

By: Jean Watt

Sometimes we are lucky enough to have a new person cross our life's path and bring nothing but good ideas, good laughs, a great friendship and memories that translate themselves into smiles and determination.

Don Thomas is such a person for me. We met in 1997 as we tried to decide what to do in the aftermath of the County's laying off of its Harbors, Beaches and Parks Director, Bob Fisher. Although we decided to create a new countywide organization (Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks - FHBP), it likely would not have lifted off the ground without Don's good-natured and steadfast willingness to take on the job of "treasurer."

That job was definitely not what Don wanted to do but someone had to do it. What he wanted to do is everlastingly emblazoned on our minds and will stay there as we continue to carry out his clearly articulated message—save the animals and their habitat, teach the children, and live within your means both ecologically and financially.

My appreciation of Don is deep as I remember his admonitions and total integrity in running a non-profit organization. In articles he wrote for our newsletter I found phrases that exemplify his mindset. He loved our Orange County parks. In a 2005 article he began with "Orange County residents are fortunate to have one of the finest park systems in the country" and ended with "We need to elevate the position of Harbors, Beaches and Parks in the County's hierarchy of vital infrastructure components. The amenities of parks, open space and historical and natural features of the County are what enriches the quality of life here, encourages people to see this as place to care for, not as a place to work and then abandon for greener pastures."

Don has been honored by the Board of Supervisor's 1999 Volunteer of the Year Award, Sea & Sage Audubon's Conservation Award, and FHBP's Green Vision Award. He is the personification of what FHBP is all about. To honor his life, we will create a tangible tribute to him to acknowledge his gifts, love of the outdoors and kinship with children.



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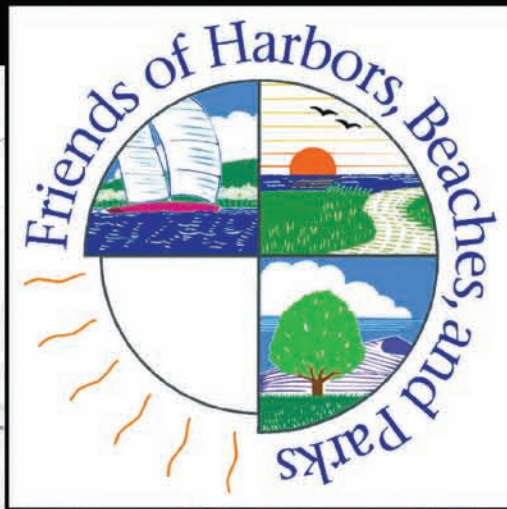
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DRAFT

A Green Vision for Orange County...

This parcel-level map is the result of an ongoing collaborative project between Friends of Harbors, Beaches, and Parks and local conservation and community organizations. It is a work in progress and intended for use as a general planning tool only.

Acquisition Opportunities

- Active Conservation Project
- Potential Conservation Land

Other Land Designations

- Public Conservation Land
- Private Conservation Land
- Public Not Protected
- Easement / H.O.A. Land
- Golf Course / Cemetery
- Landfill
- Military Land
- Utility Land

Other Map Layers

- Nature / Education Center
- Stream Corridor
- Sacred Site
- County Boundary
- Watershed Boundary
- Highway

Data compiled from a variety of sources including First American Title, with input from OC Parks; the California GAP Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara; the California Resources Agency - Legacy Project (2003); the Cities of Brea, Irvine, and San Juan Capistrano; and the California Protected Areas Database. © FHBP 2000-2013. All Rights Reserved.



Project Updates

Madrona (Map #1)

This 367 acre property is located in eastern Brea. The original project proponent was foreclosed upon by an insurance company that is also in bankruptcy. A trustee appointed by the State of Idaho is now processing the project. Due to a settlement agreement with Brea 10 years ago, they are allowed to seek approval using rules from a 27 year old, revoked Specific Plan. The development requires flattening a ridge to build 162 houses, while destroying over 1,400 oak and walnut trees. Concerns focus on liability from

landslide prone slopes, frequent wildfires (it has burned more than four times), and limited, vulnerable access. The City must approve three Statements of Overriding Consideration (for air quality, traffic and biology) which Brea has never done for a housing project before. Learn more: www.HillsForEveryone.org.



Cielo Vista & Esperanza Hills (Map #2)

Two projects are proposed for the hillsides above Yorba Linda in unincorporated Orange County. Cielo Vista proposes 112 homes on 87 acres and Esperanza Hills proposes 340 units on 460 acres. Cielo Vista is currently preparing its Environmental Impact Report (EIR) due out in March 2013, while Esperanza Hills just completed its Notice of Preparation in February 2013. The County of Orange is the Lead Agency for both projects. Concerns about these projects include: limited access (through

existing residential neighborhoods), wildfire (the Freeway Complex Fire destroyed both properties and more than 230 homes in the same hills), and traffic (existing roads do not have the capacity to handle more traffic). Hills For Everyone is taking the lead on fighting these projects. Learn more: www.HillsForEveryone.org.



Holtz Ranch (Map #3)

This 319 acre property is located in Silverado Canyon in unincorporated Orange County. The project applicant proposes the development of a church, school, convent, and cemetery on the historic ranch. The County of Orange is the Lead Agency on this project and it was approved by the Planning Commission in September 2012. Community concerns include: habitat (for the federally endangered arroyo toad), historical and cultural values (the site and area are known locations for Native American

encampments), wildlife corridor (between the Irvine Mesa and Cleveland National Forest), and traffic (the only road in or out is Silverado Canyon Road). Conservation groups, led by the Canyon Land Conservation Fund, are currently determining next steps. Learn more at: www.CanyonLand.org.



Saddle Crest (Map #4)

This 113 acre property is located near Cook's Corner in unincorporated Orange County. The project applicant proposes 65 houses. The County of Orange is the Lead Agency on this project and it was approved by the Board of Supervisors in October 2012. Community concerns include: lack of conformity (with the Foothill Trabuco Specific Plan and County General Plan), loss of natural resources (significant stands of ancient oak forests will be replaced with acorns), loss of scenic ridgelines

(the development's densely packed houses will ruin the viewshed) and its connectivity (with the Cleveland National Forest). Conservation groups, led by Saddleback Canyons Conservancy, have filed a lawsuit on this project and are scheduled for hearings in June. Learn more at: www.SaddlebackCanyons.org.



Banning Ranch (Map #5)

This 409 acre property is located in between Huntington Beach, Costa Mesa and Newport Beach at the mouth of the Santa Ana River. The project proposes 1,375 houses, a hotel and commercial space. Newport Beach is the Lead Agency on this project and the City Council approved the project in July 2012. Community concerns include: loss of natural resources (the site is home to several listed species and important habitats), traffic impacts (neighboring streets will have to absorb the more than 13,000

additional cars from this project), and loss of connectivity (the site is a critical piece of the planned 1000+ acre Orange Coast River Park). The Banning Ranch Conservancy has filed a CEQA lawsuit with hearings scheduled for spring. Learn more at: www.BanningRanchConservancy.org.



Shea (Map #6)

The long fought over Shea property in Huntington Beach was approved for a housing development by the Coastal Commission in October 2012. The developer plans to put 111 homes on the 50 acre site which is adjacent to the Bolsa Chica Wetlands. Though there were significant concerns about the lack of analysis on the cumulative impacts, violations to the Local Coastal Plan and Coastal Act and other unpermitted actions, the Commissioners believed that they had no further recourse and

approved the project. Though disappointed by the decision, efforts by the Bolsa Chica Land Trust reduced the project size by one third, with the developer responsible to restore 13 acres of wetlands to the site. Learn more about the Shea project and upcoming Goodell project at: www.BolsaChicaLandTrust.org

