

Unintended Consequences

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The annihilation of the whole town of Paradise in the recent Camp Fire is exceeded in its horrors only by the appalling loss of life suffered in the process—the worst loss of life in a wildfire in recorded California history. Many of the people who perished died while stuck in chaotic evacuation traffic. As we search for explanations for this human tragedy, several recent news reports have pointed to what seems to have been an important contributing factor: in efforts to slow down traffic on the town's main street in order to aid merchants and to fight speeding, Paradise had reduced the width of sections of the street that also served as the principal evacuation route. Conceived as a “traffic calming” measure, this was done with the intention to make civic improvements, even though some cautioned that it might result in gridlock.

This well-meaning step collided on November 8th with one of the impacts of climate change: the Tubbs Fire in Santa Rosa, the Thomas Fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara, and the Camp Fire all were driven in their early stages by weather conditions that fire fighters unanimously described as “unique,” “previously not experienced,” and “extraordinary.” The fires started so explosively that they overwhelmed fire fighters, challenged emergency warning systems, and forced people to flee for their lives with only minutes' notice. Having effective evacuation routes was essential under these conditions, something that Paradise evidently did not.

Climate change is upon us and recent reports by both the United Nations and the US government warn that we need to prepare for continuously worsening impacts: more and hotter heat waves, more and longer drought periods, and worsening wildfire conditions among them. With Santa Barbara being a community traditionally struck by wildfires, it is essential that we apply the lessons learned from the Tubbs, Thomas, and Camp megafires in our own urban planning.

Among our most threatened suburban neighborhoods is the Mission Canyon area. A box canyon with a history of burning regularly while supporting a high population density, the area has only two, two-lane, winding roads as evacuation routes: Rt. 192 (Foothill Road) to the west, and Mission Canyon Road to the south. Mission Canyon Road is the more important of the two as it leads away from potential burn areas toward the urban core and the coast. Yet, it has long

been recognized that this road has a serious potential bottleneck at Mission Bridge and an extremely narrow choke point on the south side of the bridge. To make matters worse, two other roads join very closely to that choke point: Mountain Drive and Alameda Padre Serra, both essential evacuation routes for neighborhoods of their own. It is easy to see how under chaotic emergency conditions such as those experienced in Paradise, we could have the making of another tragic log jam here.

A grass roots group of citizens organized under the name of “Safe Passage” and incorporated as a nonprofit under the name “Mission Heritage Trail Association” has worked since 2011 to find consensus solutions to a diversity of safety concerns for people traveling through that corridor, not the least of them effective evacuation in case of emergency. Predictably, these efforts have aroused voices of some who fear that any changes would result in the destruction of the character of what is one of the most historic sections of our town. For that reason, some vigorously oppose even the study of potential improvement concepts that the City of Santa Barbara has authorized. Indeed, some have suggested that the existing traffic bottlenecks are an effective and welcome way of slowing and calming traffic.

There is no dispute that historic resources are of enormous value for any community and need to be preserved at all cost. However, so are human lives. Worldwide experience has shown that it is possible to adapt historic resources in such a way as to meet essential contemporary needs while sensitively preserving their historic, esthetic, and spiritual essence. Is that not also possible in Santa Barbara? Or do we need to wait until our resistance to change has had unintended consequences?