

MOUNT WASHINGTON HOMEOWNERS ALLIANCE



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January 6, 2021

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Via: clerk.plumcommittee@lacity.org
LACouncilComment.com
Cc: Bill.Cody@lacity.org

Re: **File 16-1472-S7**

Motion to Add Mount Washington/Glassell Park Specific Plan
Area as a SUD to Hillside Construction Regulations
Hearing Date: February 4, 2021

Dear Council Members:

The Mount Washington Homeowners Alliance ("MWHHA") is a non-profit community organization of approximately 500 residents living in Mount Washington. Since 2001, MWHHA has served the community in numerous ways to preserve, protect and enhance the unique urban oasis qualities of Mount Washington and its diverse residents. We work with neighborhood councils and elected officials to balance the interests of real estate development with the land use priorities regulated in the Mount Washington/Glassell Park Specific Plan and the various hillside ordinances.

We request that our hillside area be added as a Special Use District to the Hillside Construction Regulations as soon as possible to help mitigate some of the problems caused by construction activities on our fragile infrastructure and ecosystem.

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www.mwha.us; www.facebook.com/MWHAlliance

MWHA letter to PLUM

Re: SUD to HCR

File: 1601472-S7

The accompanying Addendum chronicles some of the health and safety issues that plague our community because of rampant construction. We ask that you refer to the Addendum for supporting documentation and details.

In short, our hillside community is geographically small, covering only approximately **2.7 square miles**. In 2019 alone, there were over 50 cases filed in the Planning Department for new construction in our small area. This number only includes those applications required to go through Planning; i.e., those that ask for a variance from the code or which need a planning decision beyond what is required by the Specific Plan or zoning code. It does not include:

- The many that were built “by right” (i.e., which had no variance request) which proceeded directly through Building and Safety;
- The **cumulative effect** of the numerous ongoing construction sites of single family homes whose permits were granted in prior years;
- The extensive remodels which are ongoing;
- The proliferation of Additional Dwelling Units which are adding to the density of the neighborhood and further taxing the inadequate infrastructure of the hillside while adding to the construction chaos; or
- Unpermitted activity.

Thus, including all construction activity, **there are an estimated 100 to 150 active construction sites (or more) in this small 2.7 square mile area.**

The individual and cumulative impact of the current construction surge poses numerous health and safety concerns, particularly those arising from use of the narrow, substandard roads involved which service not just the trucks and cars related to construction sites, but also the vehicular and pedestrian traffic of the neighborhood, emergency vehicles and sanitation trucks.

For example:

- Pedestrians have been injured because of construction traffic and equipment in the roadway;
- Traffic blockages have prevented emergency vehicles and city sanitation vehicles from accessing the neighborhood;
- Without designated haul routes, trucks have used roads inadequate to support their access and have become “embedded” in the roadway, blocking all traffic including emergency vehicles;
- Concrete trucks have fallen off substandard roads and down hillsides into homes;
- Heavy construction traffic has undermined already fragile substandard roads, creating hazardous situations; and
- Delivery vehicles have fallen off roads undermined by construction traffic.

The list goes on.

MWHA letter to PLUM

Re: SUD to HCR

File: 1601472-S7

Further, our community is designated as a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone. Even without construction impediments, emergency response vehicles struggle to reach their destinations.

We have been working with Council District 1 to develop specific hillside construction regulations that will support construction of homes while explicitly dealing with problems unique to our hillside. Adding our area as a Special Use District to Hillside Construction Regulations ordinance 184827 is a significant first step in protecting the safety of our community.

We appreciate Council District 1's efforts and support the motion.

Respectfully submitted,

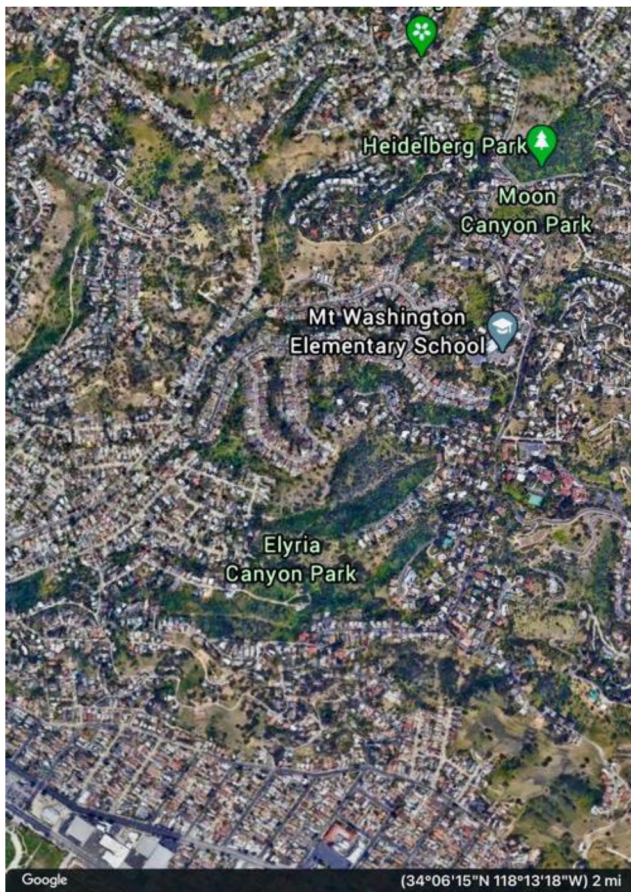
A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "D. L. Smith", written over a horizontal line.

Acting Land Use Chair
The Mount Washington Homeowners' Alliance

1. THE HILLSIDE COMMUNITY

Originally founded in 1909, Mount Washington is a geographically small hillside area of approximately 2.7 square miles. Inadequate infrastructure and road access has been an issue for 112 years. In recognition of the steep, rugged terrain a funicular was originally used to access the hill in lieu of constructing adequate roads. (See, <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Mount-Washington-Los-Angeles-CA.html> ; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Washington,_Los_Angeles .) As the area evolved, roads were constructed on an ad hoc basis, some paved, others not; some wide enough for two-way traffic, many not. While charming, the inadequate infrastructure has become strained to the breaking point.

The community includes two nature parks with native terrain and hiking trails: the 35 acre Elyria Canyon Park and the 18 acre Heidelberg Park. There are also two City parks: Moon Canyon and Carlin G. Smith. Elyria Canyon is the site of a large fire approximately 20 years ago which caused personal injury and property damage as the fire fed on the dry brush.



This map illustrates the native parkland and the hillside terrain.

2. SURGE IN BUILDING ACTIVITY

Based on data we obtained from the Department of Planning, **during a 12-month period in 2019 alone, approximately 50 applications were filed for new single-family homes in our 2.7 square mile area.** This data only includes those applications required to go through Planning; i.e., those that ask for a variance from the code or which need a planning decision beyond what is required by the Specific Plan or zoning code. It does not include:

- The many that were built “by right” (i.e., which had no variance request) which proceeded directly through Building and Safety;
- The cumulative effect of the numerous ongoing construction sites of single family homes whose permits were granted in prior years;
- The extensive remodels which are ongoing;
- The proliferation of Additional Dwelling Units which add to the construction chaos; or
- Unpermitted activity.

Thus, including all construction activity, **there are an estimated 100 to 150 active construction sites (or more) in this small 2.7 square mile area.**

Illustrative of the cumulative effect of the surge in construction are the number of construction sites on just four short streets, all under ½ mile long:¹

- West Point: **.3** mile long roadway with 8 single family homes concurrently constructed (3861, 3864, 3870, 3874, 3878, 3884, 3900, 3911);
- Killarney “loop”: **.4** mile long roadway with 5 single family homes concurrently constructed (1359, 1454, 1515, 1525, 1707 Burnell);
- Crane: **.45** mile long roadway with 7 single family homes concurrently constructed on only the “lower” portion which is also the narrowest and most steep (300, 364, 387, 395, 426, 462, 464); and
- Rainbow Ave: **.14** mile long roadway with 4 single family homes concurrently constructed on the site of a previous landslide (430, 437, 441, 451).

Other examples are available upon request.

3. FIRE AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Mount Washington is designated as a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone. Even under ideal conditions, emergency vehicles are challenged in responding to our area. The neighborhood is concerned about construction activities further limiting access for emergency response vehicles as well as impeding evacuation routes on the narrow, winding substandard streets.

¹ <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Mount-Washington-Los-Angeles-CA.html>

The following photographs illustrate how construction activity jeopardizes the health and safety of the neighborhood by blocking access for fire and other emergency vehicles.



Fire truck blocked by construction traffic on Avenue 37 in 2020. The construction truck had to slowly reverse up the hill until the fire truck could maneuver around it. Precious response time was lost. Note: Avenue 37 is one of the widest and most “standard” streets in Mt Washington, yet the fire truck was blocked because there was no room to maneuver around the large construction vehicle. The problem is only exacerbated on the more common narrow substandard streets.

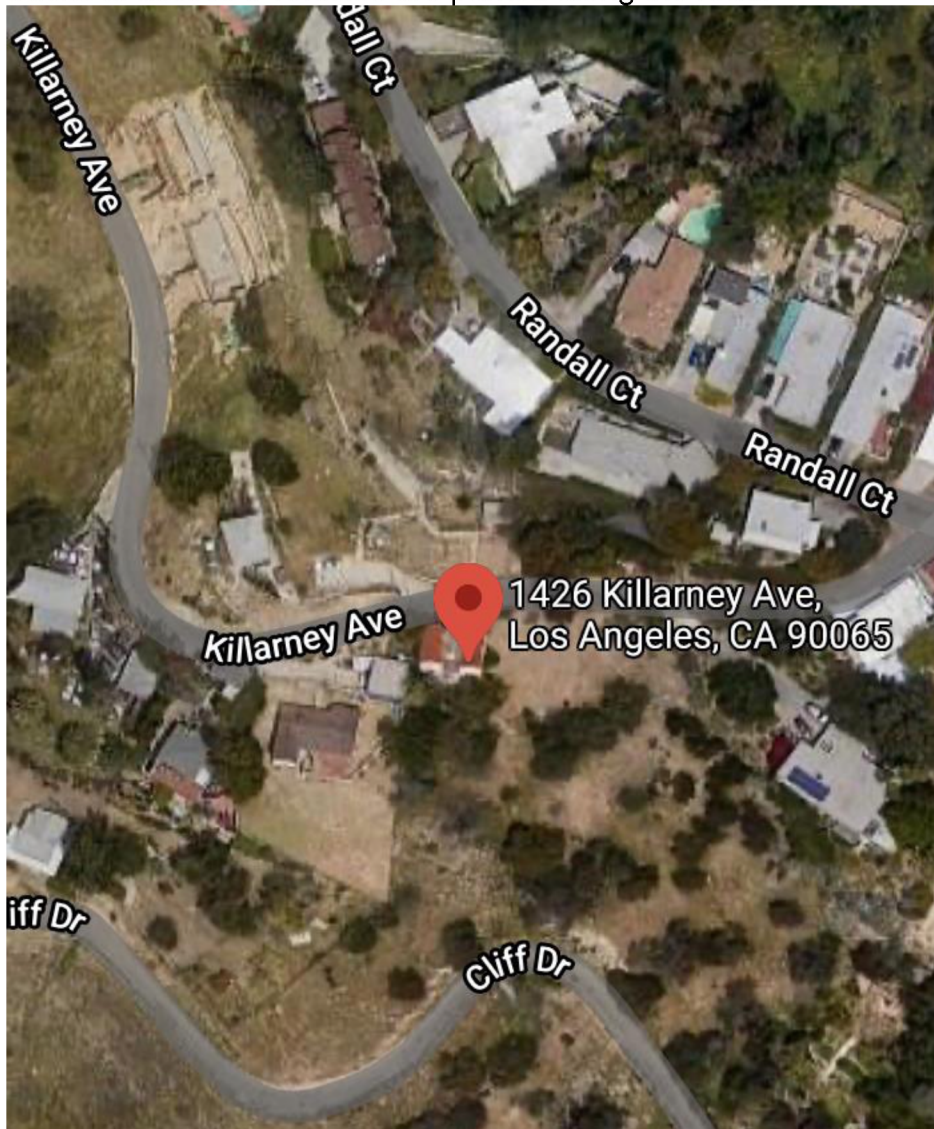


Construction activity on Killarney and Burnell blocking delivery of emergency oxygen.

The following additional examples further illustrate the difficulties in fighting fires in our area:

- **Fire at 1426 Killarney in February 2020**

Only one truck made it all the way to the house that was on fire at 1426 Killarney in February 2020. The remaining emergency response vehicles were either located four houses up the street at the intersection of Randall Court or around the corner near 1454 Killarney (which has an application pending to construct a 5,000 square foot home and is refusing to widen the road). The blind corner at 1454 Killarney is approximately 10 feet wide and difficult, if not impossible, for fire trucks to access if vehicles are parked along the road.



Firemen and first responders talking with neighbors expressed frustration at the difficulty in accessing the site, having to back up narrow winding streets and walk a substantial distance to the fire.

- **Fire at 4057 Sea View Avenue on October 20, 2016**

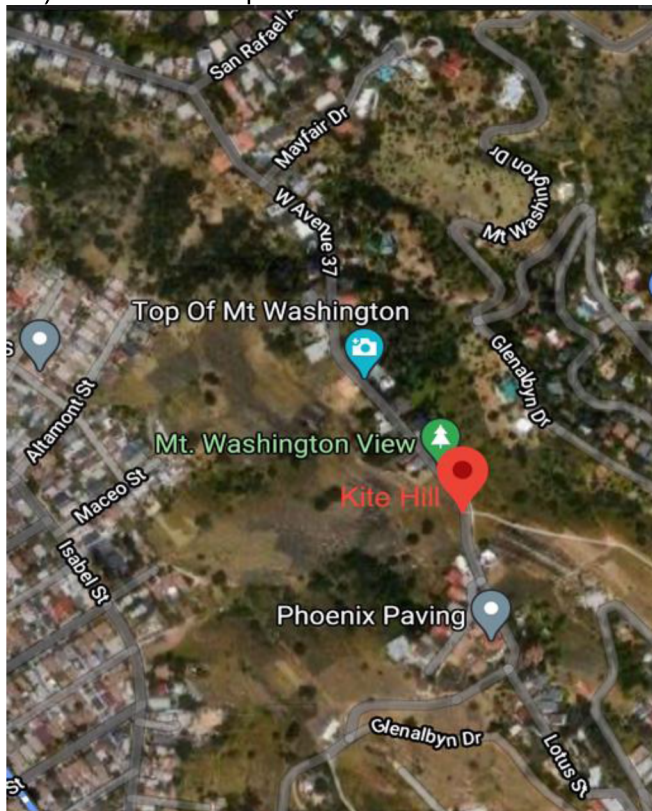
This fire illustrates the “best” conditions on the hill and still life was lost. The fire was only able to be effectively controlled from spreading because the fire trucks and first responders had access on a road over 20 feet wide with few vehicles parked on the roadway (San Rafael and Sea View Avenue).

<https://www.facebook.com/LosAngelesFireDepartment/posts/lafd-photo-gallery-mount-washington-it-took-143-los-angeles-firefighters-nearly-1303284423036071/>

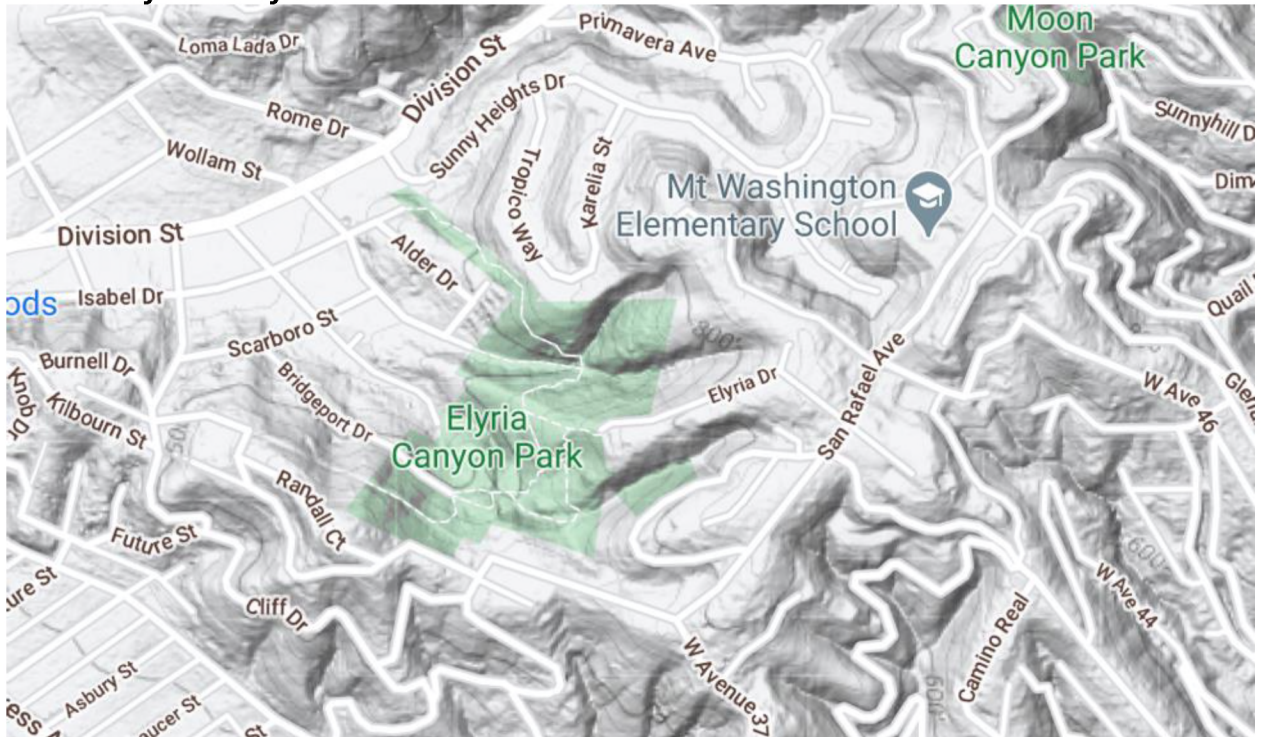
Per the LAFD Facebook summary: “LAFD: MOUNT WASHINGTON - It took 143 Los Angeles Firefighters nearly three hours to extinguish the bulk of flames, when fire engulfed a 9,111 square foot three-story descending hillside home at 4057 Sea View Avenue on October 20, 2016. LAFD responders rescued one woman trapped by fire, but were unable to locate an elderly man in the inferno that quickly involved all three floors of the massive structure, leading to at least one explosion, followed by structural collapse. Efforts to find the man's remains with canine search teams and heavy equipment continued in the days following the fire.”

- **Fires on “Kite Hill”.**

Fires occur several times a year on the “kite hill” area of the hill (part of Avenue 37) which is steep and has substantial brush.



- **Fire in Elyria Canyon Park and Brush Hazard.**



Google map views of the rugged terrain of the 35 acre Elyria Canyon. There are three additional parks on Mt Washington, also with rugged terrain and dry vegetation.



Brush clearance is an ongoing issue along the entire Elyria Canyon Park perimeter. The park only clears brush to a certain distance beneath the roadway, leaving dead trees, brush and other combustible vegetation adjacent to the

roadways. Neighbors either clear the remaining brush themselves or hire crews to remove the dangerous dry vegetation that remains even though it is not on their property. If neighbors do not clear the brush, it remains untouched and a severe fire hazard. Neighbors have repeatedly contacted LAFD brush clearance about the issue as well as park management.

The 35 acre Elyria Canyon Park had a large fire approximately 20 years ago. The fire resulted in injuries to residents and homes were lost to the fire. The fire was mostly extinguished via aerial assault because of the rugged terrain and rapidly moving fire. The neighborhood was evacuated.

At present there are two construction sites pending along the small Mount Washington Drive “loop” which borders on Elyria Canyon: 805 Mount Washington Drive and 900 Mount Washington Drive. Portions of the “loop” road are paved, portions are dirt. The road varies from 20 feet at its widest to approximately 11 feet wide. The blind curves and steep drop-offs have resulted in cars going over the side and tumbling down the canyon.

Should a fire start again in the canyon while construction is occurring at the two sites, at least 8 homes between 805 and 900 will be unable to evacuate because of the construction blockage on the single lane roadway.



4. EFFECT ON THE COMMUNITY OF CONSTRUCTION INVOLVING SUBSTANDARD ROADS

Very few roads in Mount Washington can be considered safe “standard” roadways. The vast majority are severely substandard, winding roads often as narrow as 11 feet wide and bordered by steep drop-offs. Some roads exist only on paper (yet appear on GPS routes). Some roads are private (but are not so indicated on GPS routes). All of these factors contribute to hazardous conditions when construction trucks and other vehicles utilize the inadequate infrastructure, especially without adequate haul routes and other safety precautions.

The following are just a few examples of issues arising from the interplay between construction and substandard roads:

- Concrete truck fell from construction site on August 31, 2019. A concrete truck rolled off substandard road at a construction site and tumbled into a home downhill from the site.





- October 4, 2020: Truck “fell off” Pheasant Dr., requiring fire trucks and emergency vehicles to respond. The emergency response vehicles (and the news crews) had to park on Museum Dr. and walk in. The dirt roadway is supported by a city “retaining” wall comprised of railroad ties and is inadequate to support the construction traffic that uses it. Large trucks, including concrete trucks, are currently using this road for construction on Pheasant Dr. and conditions are further deteriorating. *After the rains in December 2020, another construction truck became stuck in the mud and further damaged the road.* Pheasant Dr. is a one lane dirt road.



ADDENDUM SUBMITTED TO PLUM COMMITTEE FOR FEBRUARY 4, 2021
HEARING BY MWA RE: HILLSIDE CONSTRUCTION IN MOUNT WASHINGTON



Photographs show construction trucks on Pheasant Dr. and the deteriorating dirt roadway. Pheasant Dr. is single vehicle access. Delivery truck which fell from Pheasant Dr. because of the deteriorating roadway due to construction activity. Emergency responders with tow vehicle trying to safely extract the truck without it falling on the house below.

ADDENDUM SUBMITTED TO PLUM COMMITTEE FOR FEBRUARY 4, 2021
HEARING BY MWWHA RE: HILLSIDE CONSTRUCTION IN MOUNT WASHINGTON

- Construction vehicles blocking access on Museum Drive; Destroying street signs at Museum and Dimmick on November 25, 2020 and damaging garage and sidewalk near the sign.



- Concrete spill at Kinney and Avenue 35 in November 2020 created hazardous driving conditions. The truck was enroute to a construction site and the concrete spilled on the roadway. The roadways are steep and substandard, and no safe haul route was used.



ADDENDUM SUBMITTED TO PLUM COMMITTEE FOR FEBRUARY 4, 2021
HEARING BY MWAH RE: HILLSIDE CONSTRUCTION IN MOUNT WASHINGTON

- Concrete and delivery trucks “convoy” on the hill, creating chaos for drivers and pedestrians.



Concrete trucks stacked from Kilbourn onto Killarney as they come up Burnell.



Concrete trucks on Burnell.

ADDENDUM SUBMITTED TO PLUM COMMITTEE FOR FEBRUARY 4, 2021
HEARING BY MWWHA RE: HILLSIDE CONSTRUCTION IN MOUNT WASHINGTON

- Heavy construction trucks get stuck in the mud on dirt roads and on construction sites, requiring multiple tow trucks to extricate them which completely blocks roadways.



This photograph is of tow trucks extricating construction vehicles from the dirt portion of Burnell at the construction site.

- Construction truck embedded in road at intersection of Killarney and Randall Court, blocking access on two roads for 6 hours on June 29, 2017. The damage by construction vehicles happened at least 4 times in a 12-month period and is a continuous problem. It completely blocks ingress and egress, and endangers homes as commercial tow trucks attempt to lift the embedded trucks out of the road. Safe haul routes have not been required of construction sites and/or are not followed.



Neighbors purchased and installed signs in an attempt at "self help" because construction and delivery trucks get stuck so often on Killarney at Randall Court blocking vehicles and emergency response, and threatening homes.



- “Small” garbage truck trying to maneuver on Glenalbyn with construction debris/fence in the roadway on November 10, 2020. This proposed construction site is seeking a variance so that they will not have to do road improvements, saying that the intersecting road (Quail) is sufficient as an alternative. Quail is a very narrow road that is part dirt and part paved. It is barely wide enough for a small sedan to pass through at portions of the roadway. Moreover, as can be seen in the picture, vehicle parking is extremely limited and people are resorting to parking on the corner and using orange cones to warn other drivers. At least three other construction sites are pending nearby, including one on Quail.

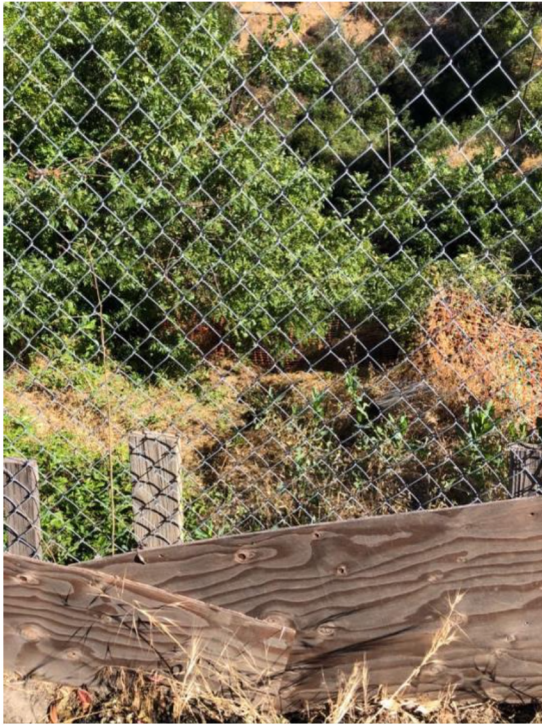


- Cliff Drive is very narrow and is partially paved and partially dirt. The guard rail adjacent to the steep canon is subsiding. Construction has been approved about 100 yards down the street. Construction vehicles and neighborhood vehicles will be using this extremely substandard road. Vehicles will not be able to pass each other and will be required to back up the narrow winding road adjacent to a steep drop off.

This is also the scene of a fire in July 2019 at which fire trucks had difficulty maneuvering (cars had to back up the road out of the way) and needed aerial assistance.



- The photographs below show hillside erosion and road subsidence at a construction site on the Mt Washington Drive “loop” adjacent to Elyria canyon.



The Mount Washington Drive “loop” is partially paved and partially dirt. It varies from a small section that is improved to the required minimum of 20 feet wide to only 11 feet wide.

Construction sites are pending at both 805 and 900 Mt Washington Dr. They are each seeking waivers of road improvements despite these serious issues.

As discussed above on page 8, if the two construction sites have workmen parking on the narrow roadway, store equipment or materials on the roadway, or have deliveries, they will effectively block all evacuation routes for at least 8 homes that are located between the two sites.

The Mt. Washington loop is adjacent to Elyria Canyon which had a severe fire approximately 20 years ago. People were injured and homes lost to the fire. The fire was mostly extinguished via aerial assault because of the rugged terrain. A fire truck that accessed the loop to use the hydrant near 804 Mt. Washington Drive completely blocked access for evacuation, limiting evacuation routes available to neighbors. Brush clearance adjacent to this canyon remains a problem.

- West Avenue 46. Three construction projects have recently obtained approval on this short road. This means simultaneous multiple active construction sites within a 200-yard radius. Cumulative construction vehicles will cause extremely hazardous conditions on this narrow road which is a primary access road for the elementary school and the Carlin G. Smith park and recreation center which includes a childcare facility. All three construction sites have sought waivers of road improvements.

None has space to park construction vehicles onsite. None has agreed to park off the hill at designated locations and carpool workers up the hill. Concrete pours, excavation or even regular deliveries to any of these sites will completely shut down access and evacuation routes.



- This photograph illustrates construction vehicles parked on both sides of Burnell under “No Parking” signs in February 2020. This activity regularly occurred during construction on this street for over three years. Construction parking and activity at this area routinely blocked garbage trucks and vehicles trying to access the hill. Flag persons were not used on a regular basis further impeding traffic and endangering the community. Vehicles had to go onto neighboring property to attempt to get by the construction vehicles and equipment which lined the roadway. This is also adjacent to a popular trail head leading to Elyria Canyon so in addition to vehicular problems, pedestrians were endangered.



- The Killarney corridor, an area less than ½ mile in length, had 5 active construction sites during a 4 year period. Construction vehicles regularly parked on both sides of the street on a blind curve under “No Parking” signs for the four years. Despite numerous requests from neighbors and from representatives of CD1, flag persons were not used at this site further endangering vehicles and pedestrians.

Because there were so many construction trucks and cars parked on the narrow substandard street a pedestrian was injured when one of the trucks was backing up in an attempt to leave the location.





Parking on the wrong side of Killarney and on the blind curve.



Deliveries made on a blind corner adjacent to Elyria Canyon on Killarney.



Excavation equipment and trucks completely blocking Killarney. June 29, 2017.



Trucks and building materials on Killarney blocking the roadway and access to the Elyria Canyon trailhead which was adjacent to the construction site. Since the pre-existing trailhead was blocked/destroyed, pedestrians used unsafe methods to access the parkland. (The construction site did not include the trailhead, but was adjacent to it.)



Construction equipment parked overnight on Killarney, and concrete trucks blocking the roadway at a blind curve. Construction vehicles routinely parked under “no parking” signs blocking the road at the blind corner as well as safe access to the popular trail head.