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Carmel Valley Residents Fight County Plans to Remove Trees

Monterey Peninsula Herald, April 11, 1985, p. 23

(photo of eucalyptus row on Boronda Road)

The cry in Carmel Valley is, "Highwayman, spare those trees."

The trees in question sit along Carmel Valley and Boronda roads--too close to the road, as far as the Monterey County Public Works department is concerned.

Where public works officials see hazards for driver an potential lawsuits against the county, more than 200 valley residents who signed petitions against removal of the trees see majestic native oaks and towering eucalyptus, greenery that they prefer to the elusive values of a safer highway.

Those different perspectives will be the subject of a town meeting Friday at 7:30 PM at the Carmel Valley Community Youth Center.

There, public works representatives will present their proposal for a \$50,000 safety project, one that will involve removing a dozen oak trees, one sycamore and five eucalyptus trees and cutting back perhaps 30 other eucalyptus trees.

Trees' Locations

The oaks grow along Carmel Valley Road between Los Laureles Grade and the Village, the sycamore just west of the grade, the eucalyptus that would be removed grow at the Carmel Valley Road-Boronda Road intersection, and the eucalyptus to be trimmed are found along both sides of Boronda Road just south of the intersection.

According to Public Works Director Bruce McCain, the oaks and sycamore are "too close to the road. They create the potential to contribute to accidents."

And because the trees are within the county's right-of-way for the road, Monterey County could be legally liable if a driver collides with one of the trees," he said.

No one has sued yet, but the county has logged 36 accidents along this stretch of road involving nine of the trees, said Ron Lundquist, a senior civil engineer with the public works department. He told the Carmel Valley Property owners Association board of directors recently that one fatality and six injuries resulted from the accident.

A Question

"Every time something hits a tree, there's a question about what you do about it," McCain said.

For the moment, his department has a preliminary grant of funds from the federal government which will pay 95 per cent of the cost of the safety project. It has marked the trees that would be removed and is soliciting opinion about the proposal.

Thus far, McCain said, "It has not been favorable, and that's probably an understatement."

Jerry Foote, president of the Carmel Valley Property Owner's Association, said that a program of planting replacement oak trees "is the only way to make it acceptable."

And Dick Nimmons, a CVPOA board member, said that if cars are striking oak trees, "Isn't it a driver problem rather than a tree problem?"

According to Lundquist, the department is seeking comment on three different projects:

- Removal of the 12 oaks and one sycamore, all of which are within six feet of the traffic lanes on Carmel Valley Road. If they were further from the road, they could be protected by guardrails that would give an errant driver some cushion in a collision. With fewer than six feet of room, Lundquist said, when a car struck a guardrail, the impact would "kick it back out into traffic" rather than absorbing the shock.
- Trimming, to a height of 20 to 25 feet of the eucalyptus trees along Boronda Road. This is "routine maintenance to manage the trees," similar to operations done elsewhere on the fast-growing Australian natives.
- Removal of four or five eucalyptus trees at the Carmel Valley Road-Boronda Road intersection. Within two years, Lundquist said, the county intends to construct left turn pockets for cars turning from Carmel Valley Road onto Boronda Road and Rancho Way. It wants to cut the trees down to five-foot stumps now, when the trees sit next to vacant lots and not next to houses that may be built on these lots. The stumps would be removed within a year, he said.

The tree issue is "controversial," Lundquist admitted, adding that, "I see a problem, we've developed a solution and we want to present it to the public."

The ultimate decision on the tree removals will be decided by the Board of Supervisors at a future public hearing, he said.

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CVPOA Opposes Tree-Cutting
Monterey Peninsula Herald, May 9, 1985, p. 14

The Carmel Valley Property owners Association went on record last night against a plan by the county public Works Department to remove about 30 trees on Carmel Valley Road between Laureles Grade and Carmel Valley Village.

The CPVOA board voted 11-2 to oppose the tree removal until the Public Works Department considers alternative measures, such as four-way stop signs on Carmel Valley Road and Boronda Road.

The department says the trees are so close to Carmel Valley Road that they present a traffic hazard.

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Supervisors Will Consider Removal of 13 C.V. Trees
Monterey Peninsula Herald, May 13, 1985, p. 21

Salinas-The fate of 13 trees along Carmel Valley Road are in the hands of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, which is scheduled to consider the elimination of the trees for safety reasons Tuesday.

Public debate on the controversial tree removal project will come less than two weeks after four persons were injured in an accident involving a tree.

Ron Lundquist, a county traffic engineer, said that the county public works department does not intend to use the accident "as a tool" in the debate Tuesday.

The county has been offered \$45, 900 by the federal government to remove the 12 oaks and one sycamore tree which county public works officials consider roadway hazards.

The trees are located between Laureles Grade and Carmel Valley Village.
Near Road

The oaks are within six feet of Carmel Valley Road. The sycamore which Lundquist said is the tree involved in the May 5 accident that injured four young people returning from a high school prom, is 10 feet from the roadway.

Public works officials say that four of the trees have been involved in the 35 accidents in which cars have run off the road in the past three years. Though the county has not been sued, Bruce McCain, public works director, said that the county could be legally liable if the severity of the accident is worsened because of the trees.

The proposal has already generated heated debate among Carmel Valley residents who say the trees should stay. More than 200 area residents attended a "town hall" meeting in Carmel Valley last month with public works officials to register their opposition to the plan.

They say that drivers are responsible for the accident, not the trees.

Tree Removal

Supervisors are scheduled to consider the tree removal at 1:30 PM Tuesday in the Monterey County Courthouse in Salinas.

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Supervisors Spare 13 Disputed Trees in Carmel Valley Monterey Peninsula Herald, May 15, 1985, p. 23

Salinas-Monterey County tucked away its axes and spared 13 trees along Carmel Valley Road Tuesday.

Though the outcome appeared a foregone conclusion, the county Board of Supervisors heard almost 90 minutes of testimony from Carmel Valley residents who opposed the county public works department plan to remove the trees for safety reasons.

The board voted 5-0 to spare the trees.

The public works department recommended the trees-12 oaks and a sycamore-be removed "as a safety precaution for drivers, passengers and bicyclists."

Bruce McCain, public works director, said the motorists who strike trees after losing control of their car are likely to sustain more serious injuries than if they don't hit trees.

Federal Money

McCain said that the county could apply for \$45,000 in federal money to cut the trees if supervisors approved the "hazard elimination" program.

But several of the 10 area residents who testified before the board echoed the sentiments of Graham Matthews, of Carmel Valley, who said "The problem is not the trees. The problem is errant drivers."

Don Underwood, for instance, blamed the large number of accidents along Carmel Valley Road on "drivers who don't have any sense."

"People without any sense deserve to have an accident," he said.

McCain said that California Highway Patrol figures indicate that there have been 66 accidents along the stretch of Carmel Valley Road between Laureles Grade and Carmel Valley Village in just three years.

McCain's department has found few friends in Carmel Valley on the tree-cutting issue. Last month, some 200 Carmel Valley residents showed up at a town hall meeting to oppose the plan.

And on Tuesday even McCain's accident statistics were challenged.

John Radon, a volunteer for the Carmel Valley Fire District, said the fire department has only responded to 55 accidents along the stretch in four years.

Four of those accidents ended with an errant automobile striking a tree, he said. But added that none of those trees caused any of the accidents.

"Many drivers are accidents just waiting to happen," Radon said. "If they are not going to hit a tree, they will hit something else."

Another individual who spoke said the tree's aesthetic qualities are more important than the blame being heaped upon them as potential hazards.

First District Supervisor Marc Del Piero agreed. "I appreciate the public safety aspects, but my appreciation for trees supercedes my appreciation for a \$45,000 grant," he said.

'Quality of Life'

"It's a matter of aesthetic and the quality of life," said 5th District Supervisor, Karen Strasser Kauffman.

Supervisors were presented a petition signed by about 1,100 area residents who opposed the tree elimination plan.

The petition "reflects on my Slavic soul very favorably," said Board Chairman Dusan Petrovic.

If nothing else, the tree controversy focused board attention on the hazards of driving Carmel Valley Road.

Strasser Kauffman, who lives off Carmel Valley Road, said that because of those hazards, "there is a concern that eventually we'll have to four-lane" the road.

"We cannot permit that," she said. "We cannot envision that."

On the other hand, some long-range planning will need to be done to try and slow cars, and the accident rate, she said.

She and several Carmel Valley residents suggested the public works department set up a four-way stop at the intersection of Carmel Valley and Boronda roads as a way of slowing traffic through that dangerous intersection.

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Supervisors Grant Stay of Execution for Trees; Promise to Seek Other Traffic Safety Solutions

Carmel Pine Cone, May 16, 1985, p. 15

The Monterey County Board of Supervisors has granted a permanent stay of execution for 13 so-called "killer trees" and promised to seek other solutions to safety problems along Carmel Valley Road.

The county public works department had proposed that supervisors use a \$45,000 federal grant to finance the removal of 12 oak trees on Carmel Valley Road between Laureles Grade and Pilot Road, and one sycamore just west of Laureles Grade.

Public Works Director Bruce McCain told supervisors his review of California Highway Patrol records indicate there have been 66 accidents along that stretch of road over the past three years.

McCain said about 50 per cent of the drivers had been drinking, but it is unknown how many actually were legally drunk at the time. McCain did not have information on how many of the accidents involved the trees proposed for remove.

But John Radon, a 15-year volunteer firefighter in Carmel Valley, gave supervisors a different story.

Radon, who researched fire department records, reported that only four accidents in the past four years involved the trees marked for the axe.

Firemen respond to every accident in that stretch of road, Radon said.

One of those was a fatality in 1982 when a motorcyclist not wearing a helmet ran into tree. Radon said the tree just prevented the motorcyclist from hitting a stone wall 10 feet from the tree. The stone wall was not planned to be removed, however.

In another incident near Porter's curve in 1983 a motorist sideswiped one of the trees proposed for removal and then struck a second tree down an embankment, Radon said.

In 1984 the drum of a concrete mixer truck struck one of the trees, he said.

Radon viewed the tree removal as "bureaucratic nonsense" to get some federal money.

"You cannot protect drivers from themselves. Accidents do not happen, they are caused."

He also noted that the trees are part of the Carmel Valley character. "The rural atmosphere of Carmel Valley is why we moved here in the first place," he said.

Another speaker, Graham Matthews, reiterated the opinion that trees should not be removed just because drivers can't stay on the road.

"The principal problem is not the trees-it's the drivers," said Matthews, a longtime Valley resident.

Don Underwood, another Valley resident, proposed that supervisors install a four-way stop sign at Boronda an Carmel Valley roads.

The stop sign would serve to slow traffic that usually does not heed the speed limits, he said.

"That would eliminate some of the problems the trees are getting blamed for," Underwood said.

Underwood pointed out that the Boronda Road intersection also is near a school bus stop an children have to cross Carmel Valley Road.

"I'm surprised some child hasn't been killed at that point," he said.

Underwood believes the trees serve as a warning to driver that the road is not safe at higher speeds.

“People with sense slow down. The ones that don’t have any sense deserve to have an accident.”

Underwood said he fears that removal of the trees will just pave the way for a four-lane Carmel Valley Road and more development.

The county does have plans to widen the road to four lanes east to Robinson Canyon Road, but farther toward the village Carmel Valley Road will remain two lanes, said Supervisor Karin Strasser Kauffman, who lives in the Valley.

Supervisor Sam Karas of Seaside—who made the motion to spare the trees—agreed with the speakers. “The problem you have today is people, not trees,” he said.

Supervisor Marc del Piero of Salinas seconded the motion, saying: “My appreciation for the trees exceeds the \$45,000 grant.”

And Chairman Dusan Petrovic of King City added that, “it does my Slavic soul good,” to hear the support for trees.

Strasser Kauffman said supervisors must do more than just spare the trees. She asked and received permission to direct staff to prepare a study on ways to improve road safety, including the stop sign, lowered speed limits and guard rails around the trees.

That report is to come back to supervisors in August.

McCain also told supervisors that a plan to top many eucalyptus trees in the same area is separate from the tree removal scheme.

The two became entwined during discussions at a town hall meeting in the Valley a few weeks ago, McCain said.

McCain said the eucalyptus topping project probably will not proceed based on the concern expressed at the meeting plus objections by those who own the property where the trees are located.

“If the property owners don’t want those trees trimmed or topped, we certainly won’t touch them,” he said.