

February 28, 2022

Mayor Sue Kempf  
City of Laguna Beach  
505 Forest Avenue  
Laguna Beach, CA 92651

Dear Mayor Kempf,

Subject: Fire and Police Protection in the Top of the World Neighborhood

The orange flames of the Emerald Fire could be seen from the Top of The World neighborhood and it was quite scary. We are thankful for the Laguna Beach Fire Department and the Orange County Fire Authority and the mutual aid for the excellent job of containing that fire. From what we could see in the early morning, it is truly remarkable that no homes were lost.

The Board of the Top of The World Neighborhood Association ((TOWNA) has been very concerned about fire protection for many years. From the TOWNA April 2017 newsletter:

**FIRES THAT OCCURRED ON NOVEMBER 18, 2016**

*TOWNA Boardmembers Carol Buss and Gene Felder attended the City Council meeting for this agenda item. The information is not well known and we want to lobby and encourage substantially increased penalties for arson, as well as an increased effort to determine who the culprits are. The Fire Chief and Police Chief reported:*

1) *On November 18, 2016 there was a fire deliberately set behind the Bark Park in Laguna Canyon. Cameras at the Wildlife shelter next door picked up two persons going behind the Bark Park and then about the same time that 911 calls were coming in that there was a fire, the camera showed two men running out past the Bark Park.*

*All four fire engines in Laguna Beach responded to this event and OCFA (Orange County Fire Authority) provided helicopter support which did most of the work putting out the fire.*

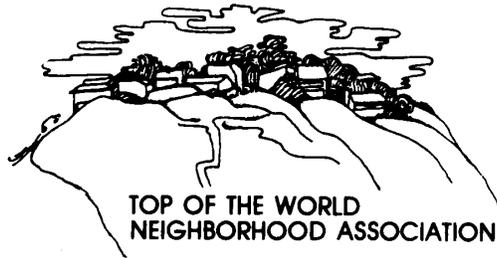
*Cameras including on Laguna Canyon Road were able to identify a car and a suspect. One man has been convicted for arson and was released after serving less than 30 days. He is to pay restitution and be on probation for 3 years. Mayor Iseman said they were pursuing a Restraining Order that he stay out of the Canyon.*

2) *While this was happening up at the Carolyn Wood View Knoll Park at Top of the World near Alta Laguna Park, three individuals were having a party including a campfire. Cameras were viewed the next day after a OC Parks Ranger reported the evidence of a fire. Cameras could not identify the three people and the case is considered closed. They are considering numerous counter measures including adding cameras.*

More recently, likely Saturday night January 14, 2022, a campfire was started behind the baseball field at the Alta Laguna Park. See attached photos. The TOWNA Board beseeches the City Council to do what you can to prevent arsonists from starting fires, and if they do, aggressively prosecute them to the full extent of the law.

Greater efforts should be made to limit, identify and punish this criminal activity. Tools that should be pursued are:

- 1) To install at the Carolyn Wood View Knoll cameras looking into the open space to detect fires
- 2) To install cameras at the top of Temple Hills Drive and Park Avenue, as well at the only two exit points bottom of Temple Hills Drive and the bottom of Park Avenue past Skyline, so video footage can be used to identify likely suspects
- 3) Lobby whatever level of government is necessary to substantially increase the presence of fire, police and ranger personnel and the criminal penalties for arson and other criminal acts in the adjoining wilderness areas



The photos of the latest incident were taken Sunday morning, January 15, 2022 on the path behind the baseball field at the Alta Laguna Park and within 100 yards of occupied homes at Top of the World. The fire department was notified and inspectors came by to evaluate the visible blackened area. Clearly, a campfire—complete with logs and lighter fluid--was started and burned for some time next to bone-dry brush, most likely late Saturday night January 14, 2022.

TOW neighbors are extremely concerned because of the:

- Increasing numbers of visitors from outside the area to the park and wilderness area; many pickle ball players from surrounding cities with loud music being played and dogs off leash
- Santa Ana wind events that took place in the days before and after this happened
- Impact on fire insurance rates and availability, and at least 3 known fire-starting attempts in and around the park in the last 3 years, as well as increase in mail and package theft, graffiti, cars rifled through, broken into or stolen in recent years
- Current drought situation and more frequent, longer lasting wind and excessive heat events
- Proliferation and unauthorized use of “e-bike” in wilderness areas with unknown battery fire risks
- Speeding and aggressive driving on neighborhood roads

Negligence is defined as failing to take proper care. There are hundreds of homes up here with proximity to the wilderness area entrance – a place leased to the county by the city and which by law must remain accessible as a public place making TOW, Temple Hills and Mystic Hills especially vulnerable to criminal acts like this incident. Moreover, our neighborhood has been subject to two separate mandatory evacuations in recent years.

If we have a shortage of police, then we need to prioritize the budget and increase our police force. Discretionary funds, such as the Parking Fund have been used for this purpose in the past. Please respond with how the City will address these problems.

Yours truly,

Gene Felder  
President  
Top of the World Neighborhood Association

cc: Laguna Beach City Council, City Manager Shohreh Dupuis; Police Chief Jeff Calvert;  
Fire Chief Mike Garcia; Emergency Operations Coordinator Brendan Manning