

Ungrounding the Laguna Canyon Road, Costs and Benefits



May 26, 2024

Dear Recap Readers:

The proposed undergrounding of Laguna Canyon is the most expensive project by far, in Laguna history. For comparison, residents voted by a 2/3 majority to tax themselves for \$20 million in order to purchase canyon open space some 27 years ago. This expenditure will be over 140 million dollars in total construction costs and millions of dollars a year in recurring costs.

The Protect and Connect project sounds good on paper. Its goals are to decrease the risk of fires, and provide bike and walking paths and more bus stops. The added benefit is aesthetic. The big question is how will the city pay for it.

Since this project is still going through the approval process and has a lot of moving parts, I am publishing an article that appeared in the Indy a couple of weeks ago, authored by Les Miklosy. It's been revised to provide more detail and to make it easier to read.

I would appreciate your thoughts on this project and would ask that you write to the City Council with your questions and concerns.

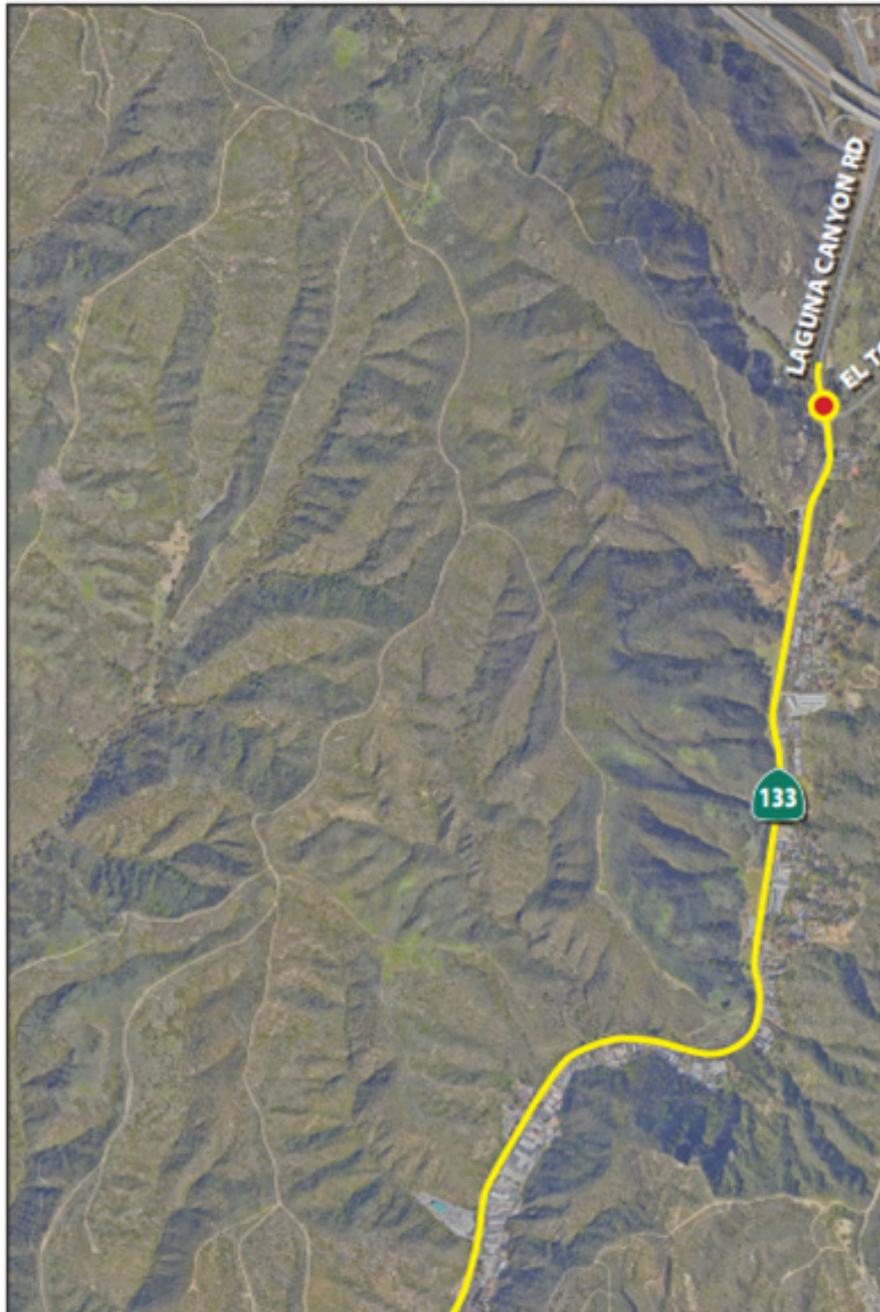
Sincerely,

George Weiss
949-295-0832

Ungrounding the Laguna Canyon Road, Costs and Benefits

Remember the Fire-and-Fear Campaign of 2018? City officials told residents that if we don't underground our utilities Laguna will burn. In November of 2018, in a public referendum vote, residents roundly defeated the bond measure to fund this campaign.

Today, city officials are at it again. City Council members, Bob Whalen and Alex Rounaghi say the Protect and Connect plan will make residents safer by undergrounding utilities. create eco-friendly bike-walking lanes, bus stops, and maybe a reversible vehicle traffic lane from Canyon Acres to El Toro Road. The total cost is \$140 million plus. Who will pay for this? It will fall on the residents of course.



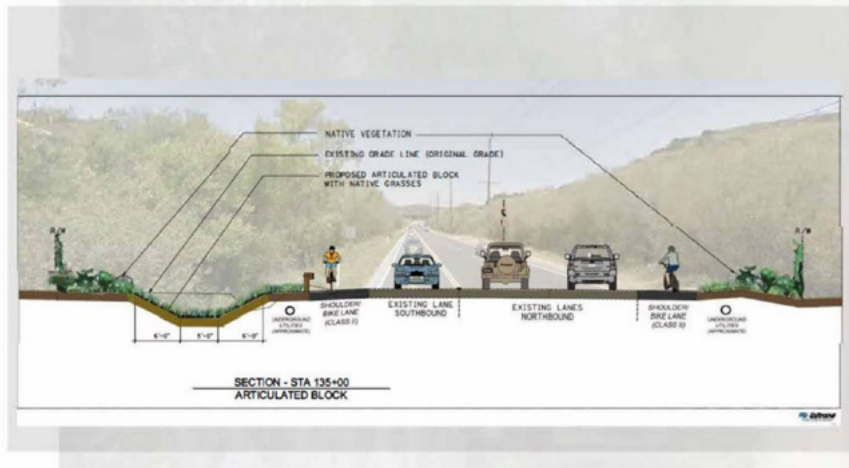
Protect and Connect - Laguna Canyon Road Project Map

The Protect and Connect Plan: The summary is taken from the **August 2022** Project Study Report (654 pages) approved by the city manager and Caltrans.

Read the report here: <https://www.lagunabeachcity.net/government/departments/public-works/engineering/projects/utility-undergrounding-projects/laguna-canyon-road-undergrounding>

Of the five design options, Alternative 5 shows the existing 34-foot roadway will be expanded to add bike lanes and sidewalk improvements on both sides and a mass transit route with 10 stops. The existing LCR right-of-way (RW) is from 68 to 95 feet or more. The project will consume all of it and even Big Bend at 53 feet grows to 61 feet. The utility line segments are connected in many vaults on or outside the maximum RW boundary, in many cases on private property.

Laguna Canyon Road (SR-133) Improvements



A typical Alternative 5 Cross Section

No increase in traffic volume is predicted and the speed limit will remain at 40mph. The measure of roadway performance used by Caltrans is the Level of Service (LOS). LOS is a measure of delay-time experienced by motorists. A traffic analysis shows the LOS for traffic will not improve after the project is completed keeping an “F” rating in 2030 to 2050. Biking and walking will improve since there are no bike/walking paths now.

The Costs for Residents: The estimated construction costs are \$40 million for the bike/walk paths, right of way Acquisition costs are \$78 million, and the **Protect and Connect** Alt-5 total is \$141 million. **Where will the money come from?** Recurring costs should also be considered. Caltrans tells us the liability costs for accidents could be up to 11 million a year. The annual road maintenance cost is currently \$250 thousand but is bound to increase substantially with the added bike/walking paths. Funding from grants is possible but so far, the city’s grant applications have been rejected numerous times.

See page 6 of the January 9, 2024, staff report.

Link here: https://lagunabeachcity.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=3&clip_id=2235&meta_id=183572

The chart below is taken from the Caltrans Estimated Cost Summary (Alt. 5)

Cost Category	Present (if built today)	Escalated
Construction	\$29,421,700.00	\$40,265,628.00
Right of Way (widening of roadway)	\$63,688,677.00	\$77,700,186.00
PR/ED Support	\$4,375,000.00	\$5,468,750.00
PS&E Support	\$5,000,000.00	\$6,250,000.00
Right of way Support	\$3,846,875.00	\$4,808,594.00
Construction Support	\$5,000,000.00	\$6,250,000.00
Total	\$108,300,875.00	\$140,743,158.00

For a breakdown of the costs by category in the above chart, see page 146. And page 46 for a project schedule. The link to the report is under the [“The New Plan” section above](#).

What Residents Attending the Workshop had to say: On May 7, LB Public Works hosted a Protect and Connect Workshop where the public could review design alternatives. The meeting was heated. One hundred attendees complained about the lack of transparency, project scale, cost, and disruption from construction to all resident traveling this roadway or living nearby. **Actual construction will take place for two years from 2028-2030.** ([Does anyone remember the traffic impacts when 3rd street from Park to Mermaid was closed for construction?](#))

Two days after the workshop, the mayor’s newsletter called the meeting “a success!” Perhaps it was for Canyon residents who stand to benefit most but certainly not for the rest of Laguna.

Back to the Failed 2018 Campaign: During the 2018 fire-and-fear campaign, a city staff report proposed three project alternatives for SR-133:

1. No build option.
2. Underground power utilities for \$90 million.
3. Hardening the high-risk LCR utility poles for \$2 million.

The third choice would meet the goal of fire protection, but it is not mentioned in the 2024 **Protect and Connect** project plan.

The City’s consultant, Mark Thomas, said the 2024 project would require finding underground vaults (*for maintenance and repairs*) outside the right-of-way. Mr. Thomas said: [“This will require easements from various \[property\] owners throughout the corridor to locate the underground facilities outside of the right-of-](#)

way. This will be cost prohibitive and potentially require the use of eminent domain and should be considered infeasible.”

The City’s other consultant HDR said: *“The results of the benefit-cost analysis for the Utility Undergrounding alternative generally support the conclusion that a utility undergrounding project along Laguna Canyon Road may be economically worthwhile under certain conditions if such a plan fits the City’s vision for the Laguna Canyon Road corridor, but also that such a project is unlikely to generate benefits well in excess of project costs.”*

See link to the HDR study here: <https://www.lagunabeachcity.net/home/showpublisheddocument/13465/638029761838900000>

A Game Changer? Pending legislation (SB-960 Weiner) will mandate that Caltrans provide a multi-modal solution for LCR with or without undergrounding. Read about SB-960 here: https://digitaldemocracy.calmatters.org/bills/ca_202320240sb960

Conclusions: Laguna Canyon is vulnerable to watershed fire which could be mitigated by girding the poles with steel. The cost is \$2 million. Why not do that now? Undergrounding LCR seem to be as more about aesthetics and getting more bikers into town than public safety. But more bike traffic will significantly increase the liability costs to the city. Residents will pay most of the **\$140** million dollar bond to make this happen. The total cost over 30 years may be double that number.

***How do residents benefit if modifying LCR won’t result in improved safety.
Les Miklosy, Laguna Beach***

Do you find my City Council Recaps helpful? If so please share this recap with a friend.

Sign up for my recaps here: <https://www.georgeweisscitycouncil.org/>

Disclaimer: All representations made in this email reflect the views of the author and are not official statements of the City of Laguna Beach or City Council. Any mistakes or omissions are the sole responsibility of the author, George Weiss

Have a question about city government, need a document, or help finding the right person to talk to or anything else, please know that our City Clerk, Ann-Marie McKay is there to assist you professionally and capably. Email: amckay@lagunabeachcity.net or call 949-497-0309

This email was sent to georgeweisscitycouncil@gmail.com You received this email because you are registered with Councilman George Weiss