



# August 2021 newsletter

## Via Zoom

### August General Meeting

Monday, August 23,  
7 p.m.

### September Board Meeting

Saturday, September 11,  
9 a.m.

### “Defensible Space” and Development Initiative on VL’s August 23 Agenda

In response to the recent upsurge of wildfires, the state legislature has just put teeth in its notion of “defensible space” (on the books since 2006) for homes in the Very High Fire Hazard Severity zone by linking it to the sale of property. Since July 1, certification that the landscaping meets the state’s defensible-space criteria or the local equivalents is required whenever a property changes hands. The state’s regulations specify, among other things, numbers of trees and the distances among them, and because they were written for the wildland/urban interface (envisioning lots with 100 feet on all sides of the structure, for example) they can be expected to be devastating for our established suburban landscapes. The law permits cities to develop their own guidelines, and the Fire Department has prepared some that it considers less onerous than the state’s, but they still include reduction to 30% cover for shrubs and a reduction of 30% for tree canopies. Meg Monahan will tell us more about the proposal, which we will want to be ready to comment on at the Council hearing scheduled for September 21.

At the same meeting, David Raber will discuss the Laguna Residents First

initiative, for which signature gathering is about to begin, that would require a vote of the people for the approval of a major development project (defined in terms of square footage, height, or car trips) within 750 feet of the Coast Highway or Laguna Canyon Road. We’ll meet via Zoom on Monday, August 23, at 7:00 p.m. and the contact number is:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82242519665?pwd=RjE3QndXYnAxbWErRXV2UUVBVeXdNUT09>

### OC Plans for Flood Control Channel Aired at Planning Commission

At a concept review hearing by the Planning Commission on August 4 about the replacement of the Laguna Canyon flood control channel from the Frontage Road to Woodland Drive, both commissioners and members of the community expressed concern about the proposal to remove all the trees on the highway side of the channel. Tree roots are being blamed for the failure of the channel (which was constructed in 1958), and in the other direction CalTrans is said to oppose trees within 30 feet of a highway. Commissioners encouraged the county staff to consider including root barriers and aim for landscaping that carries out the theme of the Village Entrance in the next stage of the planning.

## **Fifty Years of Village Laguna: Part 1, The Beginning**

Village Laguna emerged fifty years ago this month from a successful grassroots campaign for an initiative that limited building heights in the city to 36 feet. The events of the Yes on August 3 campaign were recounted in the August 2011 newsletter as follows:

In the year it all started, 1971, the city was just getting started on curbside recycling. South Coast Community Hospital was preparing for expansion. Aliso Pier and Salt Creek Beach opened to the public. Eiler Larsen had a birthday party in Bluebird Park. A pound of ground beef cost 58 cents and you could buy a three-bedroom, two-bath house with an ocean view for \$46,500. The city was developing a General Plan, and a 25-member citizens' advisory committee had recommended that one of its goals be to "maintain a village atmosphere and a sense of relaxation, peace, and tranquility."

At the same time, a study commissioned by the City Council had recommended a doubling of the city's hotel rooms to increase tourism revenue. A hotel-motel zone was proposed for a number of beachfront properties that were zoned both residential and commercial and therefore considered "unsuitable for the development the city needs"—from Laguna Avenue to Legion, from St. Ann's to Thalia, and from Mountain to Agate.

Maximum building heights in the city's two commercial zones were 30 and 50 feet at the time. The Surf and Sand Hotel had recently been granted a variance to build to 58 feet, and a 95-foot hotel at the north end of Main Beach was believed to be on the drawing board. In the Planning Commission's hearings on the proposal in January, a maximum height of 70 feet was being considered. One of those hearings drew some 250 people, all but a few opposed to the idea.

As Phyllis Sweeney (a founding member of Village Laguna and later mayor) later wrote, "The citizens were outraged. Residents stormed the Planning Commission meetings. At one meeting, Judy Ronaky, the Commission clerk, read 47 letters in opposition. The commissioners' response was

that the objections were from only a small vocal minority. No one would listen. People were meeting in each other's homes. Arnold [Hano], Fran [Englehardt], Joyce Dusenberry, and others formed a committee." (Other members of this early group, already calling itself Village Laguna, were Roger McErlane, Bill Leak, Thomasina Gunn, Joe Tomchak, Nate Rynn, Mildred Hannum, and Corky Smith.) Eventually the Planning Commission settled on a 50-foot maximum height, and before the recommendation could reach the City Council a citizens' group of five filed a notice of intention to circulate petitions for an initiative that would modify the building code to limit buildings to 36 feet above the highest point of grade citywide. Attorney Ralph Benson, engineer Merritt Trease, environmental biologist Philip Rundel, Arnold Hano, and Marjory Adams Darling signed the notice, which appeared in the *Laguna News-Post* on February 13. Then, when the required waiting period was over, volunteers, led by Phyllis Sweeney, began collecting signatures.

Phyllis continues: "Petition tables were set up at Boat Canyon Safeway, Acord's Market, Albertson's, Gene's Market, and the Alpha Beta. Volunteers manned the tables every day, all day. We had our attorney activists available to explain right-to-petition laws to hostile store managers, who threatened to call the police. The people, however, stood in line to sign. People brought aged mothers who could barely write to sign. People from Emerald Bay were chagrined to learn that they couldn't sign. Everyone wanted to." "The plan was to launch the drive on Tuesday night [March 9] at the Woman's Club. It was decided to get a head start by collecting signatures over the weekend, thus inspiring the volunteers Tuesday evening. Each volunteer was asked to phone at the end of each shift the number of signatures obtained. It was like election central Saturday and Sunday at my house as the numbers were phoned in! When the totals from the trial run totaled just 30 signatures short of what was needed to qualify, and we hadn't even started yet, my call to Arnold verged on speechless hysteria!"

The goal was 1,140 signatures, 15% of the city's registered voters, and in the end 3,049 signatures were certified as valid. Faced with these figures at its May 19 meeting, the City Council called a special election to decide the issue on August 3.

Opponents of the height limit (the newspaper, the Board of Realtors) argued variously that sound planning would require waiting until the General Plan was completed to consider any changes; that a limit wasn't really necessary because the cost of high-rise construction would be a strong deterrent; that "the woods were not exactly full of developers eager to build on our oceanfront"; that there weren't any views to be had from the areas in question anyway; that the hospital and many of Laguna's outstanding churches couldn't have been built under a 36-foot limit; that if buildings were limited in height they would have to be wider; that a height limit would restrain "the very forces which have made the city singular and attractive"; and that what Laguna needed was a return to the rule of law and reason ("To hell with the tactics of revolution sweeping our community and our nation!").

In the last weeks before the election, a local realtor went to court to try to stop it, arguing that you can't change zoning by initiative, and the judge agreed. Attorney Bill Wilcoxon appealed, and the ruling was overturned, allowing the election to proceed.

On August 3, 62 percent (4,920) of Laguna's registered voters turned out (a record, according to the City Clerk), and 75 percent of them voted yes.

According to Arnold Hano in the same newsletter, "The day after our initiative victory in 1971, the Yes on August 3 Committee dissolved itself and immediately regrouped as Village Laguna. The name came from Ralph Benson. I was chosen to serve as its first president.

"We began to meet in members' homes. We had members but no membership cards. We paid no membership dues.

We had no by-laws. When we sought to take some action we seldom counted noses. We used a system similar to the Quaker "sense of the meeting." Very close votes—10 to 9, 18 to 16—tended to split the group. We sought consensus. It would be years before we would incorporate ourselves.

"When I look back, I think the old days were better. We had a sense of empowerment. When we used the words 'village atmosphere,' the other side trembled. We won elections. Phyllis Sweeney became a Council member and the first woman mayor of Laguna Beach. Yes, Helen Keeley had won a seat before Phyllis, but I guess the four guys on the Council could not go the next step and ever vote her mayor. Phyllis became mayor and started a marvelous line of women mayors, many from Village Laguna: Sally Bel-lerue, Bobbie Minkin, Lida Lenney, Ann Christoph, Toni Iseman.

"Eventually, of course, the pendulum swung back. Every candidate for the Council learned to say 'village atmosphere.' They all became 'environmentalists.' Of course, they caved in when faced with yet another mansion. So it goes. . . . We should pledge to honor not just the words 'village atmosphere' but the concept. We must honor human scale. Big is not necessarily better.

"We will bring together again that band of brothers and sisters who back in 1971 stood up to power and, in fact, wrested it away from those who thought they were invincible. . . .

"What we all did was to make sure we can always see our ocean. It must never be otherwise. That is our honor. This is our pledge."

## To stay up-to-date on current issues, follow Village Laguna on:

Instagram - [@village.laguna](https://www.instagram.com/village.laguna)

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/villagelaguna>

YouYube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGCrG1GhR5c&list=PLri-6aeyXHv5VXtX0Ky6Zmm9XWwoeJb6mg>



PO Box 1309  
Laguna Beach, CA 92652

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### **Bills Attacking Single-Family Zoning Go to Assembly August 16**

Two bills that would strip cities of control over residential density have passed the state Senate and will go to the Assembly when it returns on August 16. SB 9 would automatically allow two and sometimes even four units on any lot zoned “single-family,” and SB 10 would allow ten units on any such lot. Neither bill requires any of these units to be affordable. Now is the time to contact our Assemblyperson, Cottie Petrie-Norris, and the Governor, Gavin Newsom, via their websites to argue that zoning should continue to be under local control and that increased density threatens public safety where fire risk is high, increases demand for water in a time of drought, contributes to global warming by replacing landscaping with structures, and enriches developers and investors while destroying neighborhoods and failing to increase the availability of affordable housing.

### **Canyon Conservancy Plans Carolyn Wood Celebration**

The Laguna Canyon Conservancy has announced a celebration of life for the late Carolyn Wood from 3 to 5 p.m. on September 12 at the Woman’s Club. Masks are required.

### **2021 Board of Directors**

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Phone: (949) 472-7503  
Web site: [www.villagelaguna.org](http://www.villagelaguna.org)