



# viewpoints

**November 2004**

**Volume 34 Issue 4**



## **In This Issue:**

**Neighborhood  
Crime—We Can  
All Help...**  
See page 3

**Estrella Park  
Beautification...**  
See page 4

**Town Name vs  
Postal Address...**  
See page 5

**Thank You, Donors!**  
See page 6

**Don't Put the Stain  
Down the Drain...**  
See page 7



## **Firestorm on Mt. Helix?**

by Larry Kinard, Fire Chief, San Miguel Fire Department

A devastating conflagration destroyed hundreds of homes in the scenic Mt. Helix area. Embers from smoldering leaves quickly spread being pushed by hot, dry, Santa Ana winds. The embers ignited critically dry vegetation that was parched due to several years of drought conditions. The vegetation in the area was overgrown and the fire had an easy path to tree crowns and nearby homes with inadequate clearance and combustible construction, including many wood-shingle roofs.

The result was a major wildland/urban interface fire that killed 25 people including a law enforcement officer and a firefighter, injured 150 others, destroyed nearly 2,450 homes, burned over 1,600 acres and did an estimated \$2.5 billion in damage. The conflagration was so intense and fast moving that day firefighters had little effect in com-

bating it, the residents in the area quickly found themselves encircled with their escape routes overrun by fire. The area was served by narrow, winding roads that were only slightly wider than a sedan making it virtually impossible for fire engines to access the area while residents were trying to escape.

While fire officials labeled the cause of the fire "suspicious," the reasons for the fire's rapid spread were neither suspicious nor surprising. A five-year drought had dried out overgrown grass, brush, trees, and shrubs, making them easily ignitable. The parched leaves of closely spaced eucalyptus trees touched in some areas and overhanging homes in others. Untreated wood shingles were the predominant roof covering for homes in the area. Unprotected wood decks and patio coverings extended out from

many of the homes and over sloping terrain that was covered with easily ignitable combustible vegetation.

That day, unseasonably high temperatures, low relative humidity, and strong winds pervaded the area, further setting the stage for disaster. With embers igniting fires hundreds of yards in advance of the main fire front, firefighters were scrambling to stay in advance of the fire, and often, failing to outflank the fire and being overrun by 100-foot walls of flames. The fire started just above Interstate-8 along the east end of Shadow Road. Within 2 hours, the fire reached the top of Mt. Helix leaving a path of destruction. As with many fires, it lost its momentum as it crested the top of Mt. Helix. Ground fire resources assisted with aircraft were able to control the fire. ■

**T**he events described above didn't occur in Mt. Helix, but did actually happen. The fire portrayed is the Oakland Hills Fire. Why do I take the events of the Oakland Hills Fire and portray them as happening in Mt. Helix? To drive home the point that the two

communities, Oakland Hills and Mt. Helix, are very similar in topography, vegetation, home construction and narrow, winding roads.

Shadow Road, Sierra Vista Avenue, Pandora Drive, Grosalia, Country View, Vista Cline

*See FIRESTORM on page 6*

## GROSSMONT - MT. HELIX



## IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

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*This newsletter reflects the efforts of your entire Board of Directors.*

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## A Message from the President



*Kristine Alessio*

**W**ith fall upon us, it is another election year. One of the most important things that you can do to enhance and protect the Mt. Helix area is to vote. You will see below a list of candidates endorsed by your GMIA Board of Directors. These are the only offices for which GMIA has endorsed candidates. Please note that GMIA does not endorse all offices. Historically we have limited our endorsements to those offices which are exclusively or nearly exclusively within our boundaries or have a major impact on our area as Board of Supervisors, Valle de Oro Planning Group, San Miguel Fire Protection District, San Diego County Sheriff.

We have two guest writers in this issue, Larry Kinard and Erin Drown. We sincerely appreciate their contributions to Viewpoints and hope that in the future we have additional guest writers from agencies that have an impact in our area. We are very pleased that GMIA has developed excellent relationships with our public officials. It is through the support of you, our members, that GMIA can continue to have these relationships and continue to improve and protect the Mt. Helix area.

Finally, I would like to extend a warm welcome to our newest Director, Dr. Rick Bartlett, a long time area resident. From time to time, we have vacancies on our Board. If you would like to be considered for a position on the Board of Directors, please feel free to contact me directly. I welcome your involvement.

May you all have a blessed holiday season and new year. ■

## GMIA's Endorsements

### VALLE DE ORO PLANNING GROUP

The Valle De Oro Planning Group is an integral part of the Mt. Helix Community. It advises the County Planning and Environmental Review Board, the Zoning Administrator, the County Planning Commission and on certain matters the County Board of Supervisors. Recently with the assistance of the Valle De Oro Planning Group, GMIA has forced environmental review for cell phone sites, ensured that land use designations and zoning remain the same for our area under County GP 2020, and has maintained a stance in support of the General Plan for our area and the Valle De Oro Specific Plan and against rezones and Plan Amendments that threaten our

rural lifestyle. The Valle De Oro Planning Group has been integral in the planning of the Kaiser Hospital facility on Avocado, getting stop signs and turn lanes in place to reduce traffic impacts of new development, among other issues. The Valle De Oro Planning group members are your local elected representatives and respect your desires for the Mt. Helix area.

**ENDORSEMENTS:** Susan Brownlee, Gerald Collier, Allison Henderson, Dan Hyatt, Clarice Manning, Randall Millar, Dan Mitrovich and Gloria Ripperger.

### SAN MIGUEL FIRE PREVENTION DISTRICT

**ENDORSEMENTS:** Caroline Braun, Tom Clark, Chris Heiserman and Larry Jackman.

## Neighborhood Crime — We Can All Help!

by Tim Carpenter & Erin Drown

Our community has made some progress against crime, although certainly more is needed. In the four neighborhood areas covering Mt. Helix, we've had a definite decrease this summer in the number of residential burglaries due to a lot of public education on the importance of reporting crime. At the same time, though, we've had an increase in property crime that could be attributed to several things, mainly growth in the area and more traffic throughout, and more new buildings (homes, apartments and commercial centers) that also tend to increase crime.



### Neighborhood

The Neighborhood Watch groups are by far the most efficient and effective means of curbing crime in our area. We cannot and should not expect law enforcement to do this for us. Those of us working from home can be proactive and help prevent questionable activities:

- Work with one or two neighbors to keep a watchful eye and deter potential criminal activities
- Do not assume that a yard maintenance truck or delivery truck is simply that—these are tricks that burglars have used in recent months to haul away stolen belongings!
- Keep neighbors' phone and cell numbers handy for emergencies or quick alerts.
- We can work together to deter crime, so don't wait until your life is violated to start prevention. Contact the local Sheriff's crime prevention unit for information on starting or joining an existing neighborhood watch: Erin Drown San Diego County Sheriff's Department Crime Prevention Specialist 3240 Main Street Lemon Grove, CA 91945; 619-337-2037; Erin.Drown@sdsheriff.org.

### Home

Last summer our area had several series of burglaries and this year we have had more vehicle crime. Some steps you can take to deter crime include:

- Do not leave garage doors open—they invite criminal observation for later break-ins even if they don't attempt it at that moment.
- Keep inside garage doors locked! If a criminal gets in your garage, don't make it easy for them to walk into the house!
- Secure pet doors when away and make sure they cannot be easily dismantled or removed from the outside.

- Leave an outside light on in dark, non-visible areas.
- Don't have your mail stopped by the postal service when leaving town—have a neighbor pick it up for you.
- Be conscious of yard and pool maintenance worker activity.
- Don't leave valuables in your car and invite opportunities of theft.

### Identity

Identity theft seems to be the trend of the future with many reports of mail theft, stolen purses, wallets and pieces of identification for the criminal's financial gain. This is an easy crime of opportunity where the criminal can remain faceless and nameless, while stealing thousands of dollars and wreaking havoc on other's good names. Do NOT throw away anything you wouldn't want a stranger to see! Shredders are an affordable and excellent solution. Make an effort to be aware of your surroundings when carrying valuables—even in daytime public areas. Criminals prey on the unaware and unprepared.

In January we will receive our quarterly statistics for the last six months, provided by the FBI and our Crime Analysis unit, which we will be able to compare to 2003. Anyone interested in crime statistics may contact Erin Drown (above), or Tim Carpenter at [tc-n-mthelix@mindspring.com](mailto:tc-n-mthelix@mindspring.com). The Sheriff's Crime Prevention Unit is here to assist us. Let's all be proud of our community and make it safer. ■

## Stop Junk Mail

by Kristine Alessio

Are you sick and tired of piles of junk mail? There are solutions for both residential and business addresses. You can choose to "opt out" of the database that many credit card companies and lenders use to mail solicitations and advertisements. Call this toll free number 1-888-5OPT-OUT for more information. Business addresses can reduce junk mail by contacting one or both of the following companies and request that their name be removed from their databases. Dun and Bradstreet: 1-800-333-0505 or email [custserv@dnb.com](mailto:custserv@dnb.com), and InfoUSA: write your request to be removed to P.O. Box 27347, Omaha, NE 68127 or fax your request to 1-402-331-0176. ■





## The Beautification of Estrella Park

by Al Platt

**N**ow an unsightly piece of vacant land – soon a beautiful landscaped park! As most of you know from previous issues of this newsletter, Estrella Park has never been developed by the County as a park. A committee of community volunteers, chaired by Joan Tweed, has been working diligently to get this property developed as a passive, landscaped and beautified County Park. Working with the County Parks Department and the office of County Supervisor Dianne Jacob for almost two years, we now have a light at the end of the tunnel and, barring any unforeseen delays, should be enjoying the beautified Estrella Park within two to three years!

### The Finished Product

The overall preliminary design of the developed and landscaped park will incorporate drought-resistant plants, a few non-view-obstructing trees in the lower area of the park, a water collecting pond, and some low water and low

maintenance grassy areas. The park will still retain many of its natural and rustic characteristics to the maximum degree possible. A network of walking paths will crisscross the park from top to bottom and the main water runoff route from the drain system at the top of the park down to the collecting pond may include an attractive bridge. General maintenance of the park will be a slight increase in annual cost to the County, but so worth every penny.

### Park Development Funding

The County has estimated that the final design and actual development of Estrella Park will cost just under \$300,000. The current and primary planned source of funding will be the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, the same source used for other Casa de Oro community improvement projects. Grant proposals will be submitted in each of the next two years: the first to cover the cost of the final design, and the second to cover

the actual construction cost for development of the park. It is anticipated that the minor cost of annual maintenance can continue to be covered out of County operating funds.

Hopefully the timeline for completion of Estrella Park can be accelerated due to potential Park Land Development Ordinance (PLDO) Funds, accumulated by allocation of a certain portion of all County building permit fees collected. PLDO funds are specifically designated for development of new County parks, although no PLDO funds have ever been used for Estrella Park. With a \$128,000 funding amount available for use in the Valle de Oro (VDO) Planning Group area, the VDO Planning Group recently voted unanimously to recommend that the entire \$128,000 be used. If the County Board of Supervisors' final decision is to use these funds for Estrella Park, our new park could be developed a year earlier. Let's hope for the best. ■

## 2004 Calendar of Events

### Saturday, October 30, 1:00 - 3:00 pm

Halloween on Mt. Helix  
Mt. Helix Park

Lots of Safe Treats, Apple Bobbing, Contests & more  
Adults \$5, Kids \$2.50. Free to "Friends of the Park"  
Call 619-330-8288 to RSVP.  
Sponsor: Mt. Helix Park Foundation

### Saturday, November 27, time TBA

After-Thanksgiving "Turkey Trot"  
Mt. Helix Park

Trot off those extra Thanksgiving pounds (or run, walk, mosey...)  
Sponsor: Mt. Helix Park Foundation

### Sunday, December 19, 7:00 - 8:00 pm

Holiday Traditions on Mt. Helix  
Mt. Helix Park

Caroling, cocoa and holiday cheer.  
Sponsor: Mt. Helix Park Foundation

## Code Enforcement Update

by Kristine Alessio

Each month many complaints are received by GMIA regarding allegedly illegal signs, parked vehicles and land uses. It is very important that you make the first contact to the appropriate agency. You can find the phone numbers listed in this issue of Viewpoints.

In the event that you are unable to resolve the situation after making your complaint, then please advise GMIA in writing as to the problem you are having with the agency in question and we will try and assist you in getting the violation resolved. Currently in the County of San Diego, due to budget cuts, only code enforcement issues that are a serious threat to public safety are being investigated. You may still call and make a com-

plaint and a code enforcement officer will send the alleged violator a letter, but further investigation will not take place or any citation issued to the offender unless, again, there is a serious threat to public safety.

The County of San Diego considers issues such as illegal grading which is resulting in a hillside sliding into a road a serious threat. Illegally parked cars, illegal signs and other such uses will probably not be considered a serious threat. If you live within the City of La Mesa or the City of El Cajon, there are not such drastic budget cutbacks and code violations will be investigated as usual. ■

## Town Name vs. Postal Address

by Al Platt

### Can I use “Mt. Helix” as my postal mail address?

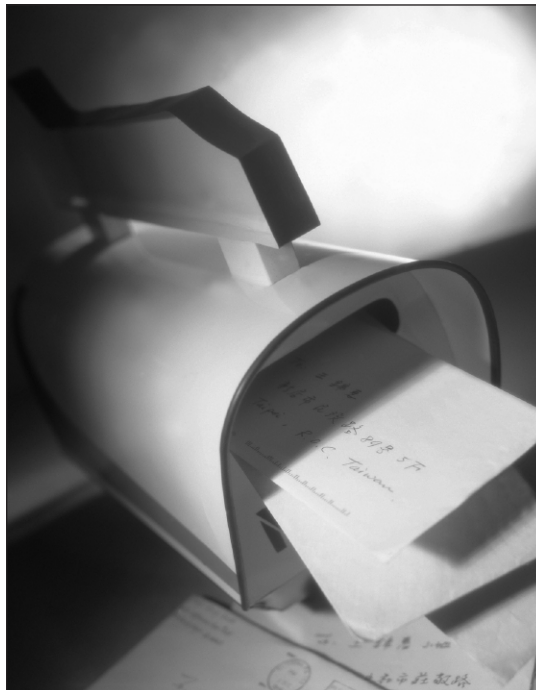
This question has been asked by GMIA members over and over in recent years. Many members would like to be able to revert to the old “Mt. Helix” nomenclature in their personal mailing address, going back to the days when there was a legitimate Mt. Helix post office.

With the advent of the federal zip code system, each zip code area was assigned a “city name” by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS).

Unfortunately, “Mt. Helix” did not make the cut and was eliminated from any zip code identification. Zip code names do not reflect just cities but also areas, and several numerical zip codes may have the same city name (La Mesa and El Cajon, for example).

If you use the name of the town prescribed by the federal zip code system, it may not reflect the unique area in which you reside (“La Mesa 91941” covers some of the city of La Mesa plus some of the unincorporated Grossmont/Mt. Helix area; “Spring Valley 91977” covers some of the unincorporated Spring Valley area as well as some of what residents consider the unincorporated Mt. Helix area).

### Are there any options for the name of the town to use in my postal mail address?



Not really, if you go by the officially designated zip code town names, and Mt. Helix is not one of those. However, the unofficial advisement of any key USPS representative is: *the ‘city name’ in any postal address is not a factor in the delivery of postal mail; in actual practice all postal mail is sorted first by numeric zip code and then by street address.* The name of the city in the postal address is completely disregarded, so you could use “Smallville” instead of “La Mesa” for zip code 91941, and technically your mail should still be delivered. Some of our members have already been using “Mt. Helix” for their 91941 postal mail address and receiving normal mail delivery.

### This is strictly unofficial information— use at your own risk!

We don’t want to start a “movement” or crusade against the USPS; however, we have received questions on this subject so many times that we thought we should share with you what we have learned about this situation.

But, be aware, if some mail sorter or specific route delivery person takes exception to the use of other than the officially designated city name for your zip code, you will probably have to go along with that decision. ■

## Thanks to Our Donors!

Members often make donations to support the operations and functions of GMIA, in addition to paying their annual dues. Your GMIA Board appreciates these financial gestures and periodically recognizes these donors in this newsletter. Below are the names of the most recent donors since the publication of the last list of donors. Again many thanks from your GMIA Board of Directors.

Jim and Lisa Achebach  
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 Patrica Yuengling  
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 Dave and Jocelyn Zimmerman

### FIRESTORM, Continued from page 1

Road, Arroyo Road, Rushville Lane, and Alto Drive are only a few of the roads serving the Mt. Helix area that make fire professionals anxious. Under the right weather conditions, a fire moving through these areas would be next to impossible to control. There are no significant fuel breaks to allow firefighters to make a stand. Even the main thoroughfare, Fuerte Drive, is not wide enough and is lined with eucalyptus trees, which would make it extremely difficult to stop the fire from jumping the road.

It is unlikely the Mt. Helix community would tolerate the widening of roadways throughout the area even if it could be accomplished. People move to Mt. Helix for the ambiance of a rural feel and seclusion. This lifestyle is envied by most, however it is not without risks. There are things you, the homeowner, can do to help us protect your property. In the fire service we use a term "defensible space." You may have heard this term during news reports from fire officials.

- The first 30 to 50 feet around your home should contain only low growing plants with low fuel volume that are resistant to fire. Make sure there are no trees within 10 to 30 feet of your chimney opening. If you have a wood shingle roof, replace it with a Class A or B roof.
- The next 50 to 100 feet should be a transition area that can have up to 30% native brush mixed with fire resistant ornamental vegetation.

These are just two suggestions for making your home safer in the event of a wildfire. In addition to making your home safer, develop a clear plan for evacuation and make every family member familiar with it. Have (when possible) at least two routes away from your home. Have a meeting point somewhere away from the area in the event you become separated from your family. Plan ahead for items you wish to take. Keep it to a minimum. Often when you are notified to evacuate you only have a few minutes.

When fire officials are faced with a fast moving wind-driven fire in an area with

narrow roads, poor water supply and homes surrounded by flammable vegetation, the Incident Commander is faced with a difficult decision; deploy resources into an area where there is little chance of stopping the fire and places firefighters at tremendous risk, or move to an area of a fuel break, either natural or manmade (such as Fuerte Drive), and make a stand there. The choice is obvious. However, if a community has been proactive and cleared its properties of flammable vegetation, or thinned it to a manageable level, it makes it tactically feasible to go into that neighborhood to protect homes and attempt to control the fire.

The San Miguel Fire District stands ready to protect you and your family in the event of fire or medical emergency. Your firefighters are well trained, highly motivated and courageous individuals. Please do your part to better enable them to serve you in a time of emergency. Our Fire Prevention Bureau stands ready to assist homeowners with information on how to make their homes safer. The San Miguel Fire District number is (619) 670-0500. ■





## Don't Put the Stain Down the Drain!

*Proper disposal of hazardous waste is a must!*

by Al Platt

### What are "hazardous materials" and do I have any?

Identification and handling of many liquids and compounds we use in common daily tasks as "hazardous" is a relatively recent development in our country and most of the world.

Although a cleaning agent (such as the commonly used "409") may seem harmless when used as directed, if used incorrectly and more importantly if disposed incorrectly as waste, it can be very harmful to both humans and the environment.

Even latex paint falls into the category of hazardous material. Careless and thoughtless disposal of such chemical liquids and compounds can lead to contamination of soil and ground water, and can be the cause of serious medical conditions if exposed directly to humans.

### What are we supposed to do for disposal of hazardous material?

The County provides a service for properly disposing of unwanted hazardous liquid and compounds. Just call (619) 596-5100 to make an appointment to deliver your hazardous waste to Waste Management in El Cajon. These appointments usually occur on Saturday, quite often a month or more after the date of your call.

Your GMIA Board very strongly recommends that all members practice good hazardous waste disposal habits. Look around your house and property, and instead of letting that old can of no-longer-needed insecticide, cleaning solution, or paint just sit on your property, call the County to schedule an appointment (619) 596-5100. ■

Helpful Telephone Numbers	County of San Diego	City of La Mesa	City of El Cajon
<b>ROADS</b> Resurfacing, closures, potholes, etc.	Department of Public Works <b>1-877-684-5000</b> or <a href="http://www.co.san-diego.ca.us">www.co.san-diego.ca.us</a> Dept. of Public Works section online road service request	<b>619-667-1450</b>	<b>619-441-1658</b>
<b>LAND USE</b> Zoning violations & other illegal land use	Code Enforcement <b>619-441-4264</b>	Code Enforcement <b>619-667-1177</b>	Code Enforcement <b>619-441-1716</b>
<b>LAW ENFORCEMENT</b>	<b>911 if Emergency</b> or Sheriff's Dept (Lemon Grove) <b>619-337-2000</b>	<b>911 if Emergency</b> or La Mesa Police Dept. <b>619-667-1400</b>	<b>911 if Emergency</b> or El Cajon Police Dept. <b>619-579-3311</b>
<b>ANIMAL SITUATIONS</b> Animal Control	<b>619-236-2341</b>	<b>619-667-1436</b>	<b>619-441-1580</b>
<b>HAZARDOUS MATERIAL DISPOSAL</b>	<b>1-877-713-2784</b> for guidance and information <b>619-598-5100</b> to make an appt. for disposal	<b>619-287-5696</b> to make an appt. for disposal	<b>619-596-5100</b> to make an appt. for disposal
<b>GENERAL INFORMATION</b> For categories not listed above	<b>858-694-3900</b>	<b>619-436-6611</b>	<b>619-441-1776</b>



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### **About GMIA ...and What We Do**

**T**he Grossmont- Mt. Helix Improvement Association (GMIA) is the oldest and largest association of its type in San Diego County, if not the entire State of California. It was formed in 1938 as a result of community concern for the lack of adequate land use planning and zoning type requirements. It is a non-profit public benefit corporation that represents thousands of families residing in single family residences in the large unincorporated area of the County that is east of the city of La Mesa, south of the city of El Cajon and generally north of SR94. The GMIA membership area consists of over 5,000 single-family owner occupied residences with a population approximating 20,000 people.

The primary mission of GMIA is to work on behalf of all GMIA community members to ensure that the quality and character of our community is preserved and enhanced. Unlike a typical "homeowners association," GMIA does



not own any property or facilities, nor is it responsible for any property maintenance. GMIA is served by an elected, unpaid Board of Directors and has no paid officers or employees. The GMIA Board works with County and regional governmental entities to help resolve issues that impact our community such as transportation systems, traffic control, planning and land use, zoning, code enforcement, as well as crime prevention

and law enforcement.

GMIA invites and encourages all residents in our membership area to become active members and to support the efforts of the GMIA Board to preserve and enhance the character and lifestyle that are currently enjoyed in our wonderful community.

For more information on GMIA, please visit our website at [www.GMIA.net](http://www.GMIA.net) ■