

Fire Safety and Marina Development

As you may be aware (and if not, keep reading!) there is a very large marina (over 250 boats) planned for Cypress Creek Cove, to be located in part along the preserve just below and adjacent to our neighborhood. Setting aside for the moment the issues of crowding, changing levels and similar, there is a justified concern that such a marina, if built, would represent an extreme fire hazard to the residents of the Comanche Trail community.

We all watched as the sickening events of Sunday, September 4th unfolded at Steiner Ranch: In less than 15 minutes a fire which started along 620 spread through the canyon that separates Steiner Ranch from the road and destroyed the first home. Over the next four hours this fire completely destroyed two dozen more homes, and damaged about 30 more on top of that. The entire Steiner neighborhood was evacuated—a process that took several hours. The neighborhood was then closed off for nearly two days. The area burned is almost exactly that same size as the Comanche Trail Community: The canyon that was traversed in minutes by the initial fire is substantially similar to the canyon that surrounds our neighborhood.

What does this mean?

It means that if a fire were to start at the base of the BCP tract along Cypress Creek Cove, and if the typically prevailing winds caused that fire to race up our canyon and over the top of the preserve as it did in the early 1980s, our entire neighborhood would have about ten (10) minutes to completely evacuate before Comanche Trail was cut off by fire, preventing further escape as well as preventing the arrival of emergency and fire fighting equipment by road. This is simply the reality of the geography and road plan around which our community is built. One way in. One way out. Vulnerable to wildfire.

Obviously, it is paramount that we are each responsible for fire safety as it applies to our own homes, and that we are prepared to assist our neighbors and work together in the event of a wildfire. We have created a fire plan as a community, and will be offering additional fire safety programs on an ongoing basis. Low-rain conditions are becoming more common, and so the chance of a serious fire rises dramatically. This potential hazard will not go away any time soon.

All of this calls into question the proposed marina: Since I have lived in Austin there have been multiple marina fires, with some marinas burning more than once! In all cases, the marinas are generally total losses, and the fire is contained only because the marinas themselves are located on water and away from land other than at the access point to the marina. These marinas are directly accessible by vehicle, so fire fighting equipment can be brought in to control the fire and protect nearby land and buildings.

The proposed marina lacks any physical road access—patrons would be ferried by boat—so the docks themselves could well line the steep hillside area below preserve. If a fire started, the only available fire prevention would be a fire boat or helicopter. While hand-held extinguishers might also be present, ask yourself: If you were on a burning dock, with no land access, would you look for an extinguisher...or dive in the water and swim across the creek?

Our Asst. Fire Chief, Mr. Durham, has worked hard with regard to the Zip Line business that is currently operating below Mountain Trail. It is likewise ferrying patrons back and forth; it too relies on water-based fire fighting and hand-held extinguishers for fire control should a fire break out. Mr. Durham has estimated the fire boat response would be about eight (8) minutes. This means that any fire...once past the control point afforded by hand-held extinguishers—would have a minimum of eight minutes to gain strength and become a wildfire. Think about that: We have a total of ten minutes to evacuate, and the fire has an eight minute head start.

Our neighborhood has filed a strong opposition to this sort of development on Cypress Creek Cove, citing the fire hazard that is compounded by the lack of road access for fire fighting. We have opposed the “Floating Habitable Structures” (floating condos, proposed by the same developer) and are now focused on preventing any marina or other commercial development that would put our neighborhood at risk.

What Can You Do?

First, you can ensure that your home is protected, and that you have a thought-out and rehearsed plan in the event of a fire emergency. First and foremost is the safety of the people in our community.

Second, you can participate in fire safety support programs: Consider becoming a trained volunteer fire fighter, for example, or being a block captain for your street to help coordinate an evacuation should one be required.

Finally, consider supporting the “Stop The Marina” effort by writing letters to your elected representatives and regulators, and by considering a financial donation to the STM cause. Residents of the Volente area are being asked to consider a contribution of \$250 per household to offset the legal expenses associated with ongoing work in opposing these development. Waterfront residents in Cypress Creek Cove are being asked to consider \$500 per household. For Comanche Trail residents, the suggested donation is \$100 per household, up to \$250 for waterfront households. No matter what level of support you choose—ten dollars, twenty dollars or more—know that your contribution is very important and is sincerely appreciated.

If you are interested in learning more about this effort, please visit StopTheMarina.com. If you would like to donate, look for the donation table at the check-in area at our upcoming summer party in Windy Point Park.

No matter which of the above you choose to do, please take the time now to ensure that your home is “fire safe” and that you have a fire evacuation plan. Let’s work together to ensure that “Burning up in the Texas heat” is just a metaphor...and not a headline.