

Wonder Stump residents win ‘battle;’ county halts changes to idyllic road

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Residents of Wonder Stump Road received the news Tuesday they’ve been waiting years to hear – Del Norte County will make no changes to the beloved, redwood lined, one-lane road.

The Board of Supervisors voted to accept the county staff’s recommendation of maintaining the “status quo.” All supervisors were present except for District 2 Supervisor Lori Cowan.

For longtime resident Mack Eller, the fight to maintain the idyllic lane was waged through a social media campaign that went viral around the world and the supervisors actually listening to the overwhelming opposition to any development plans.

“It sounds like we may have won a battle, maybe not the war, because it looks like they can change their mind down the road,” Eller told The Triplicate. “But it sounds like the county listened to us.”

Wonder Stump Road, a two-mile stretch of road off U.S. Highway 101 about four miles north of Crescent City, got its name after an enormous, 1,500-year-old redwood toppled, and over the next 3,500 years another

redwood grew up, over and around the original. The upper portion of the growth was logged in the 1800s, leaving behind an unusual stump growth that remains to this day near Eller's property.

The lane itself features redwoods along both sides, creating a canopy effect. Residents feared that the trees in this canopy would be logged.

The county began looking at potential hazards along the narrow lane in 2018, including ditches on either side that had to be hand cleared and low hanging branches that were problematic for emergency vehicles and school buses.

Then in July 2019, residents received a letter the county was seeking input from the community to weigh the pros and cons for making potential improvements. Several options were presented at a community meeting in December that included the widening of the road and removal of the redwood trees.

Eller's wife Donna kicked off a "Save Wonderstump" Facebook page with a link to a petition on change.org that now has more than 6,000 signatures from all over the world. The story was published widely, including on the front page of the Los Angeles Times.

During the Zoom meeting, supervisors heard from residents still in doubt of the final vote.

"I think it's pretty clear what the people want with over 6,000 signatures from all over the world," Smith River resident Joni Forsht wrote to the supervisors by email. "I just can't see how you can ever consider removing trees from Wonder Stump Road. But, most importantly, there has been an outcry from residents who live in this beautiful place of peace."

Donna Eller told The Triplicate they were amazed the petition signatures printed out to 284 pages.

"They started coming from all over the world — Zimbabwe, Kenya, England, New Zealand. We were wondering how in world they were finding our Facebook page," Eller said. "A lot of them were military who used to live here or came here as tourists. A lot of them grew up here and moved away. We have several generations who walked through the tree tunnel, many to get their wedding pictures taken there."

In the staff report, Roads Superintendent Jeff Daniels and Assistant County Engineer Rosanna Bower wrote that the staff considered seven conceptual alternatives, taking into consideration community response, the number of traffic collisions, effort and expense to maintain the road and the trees in the area.

Del Norte Local Transportation Commission Executive Director Tamera Leighton told the supervisors Tuesday that the county requested funding from the commission to complete its Wonder Stump Road study.

Leighton added she hoped everyone who signed the petition opposing any changes to the road would read the document "rather than the chatter on social media" so they could get past a lot of misinformation and understand the facts of what the county was looking at.

"Before the project was initiated there was a lot of misinformation going on in the Wonder Stump community area," she said. "I really appreciate that county staff's initiating this work to put an end to some

of the misinformation, trying to get facts out there, solicit public comment and do the hard job.”

The report contained more than 200 written comments and a printout of the petition’s 6,200 signatures. Del Norte Local Transportation Commission’s Commonplace tool was used to gather the community input.

“The outcome of the planning document is the majority of participants in the planning process would like to see the status quo maintained,” Bauers and Daniels wrote in the report. “This is the easiest alternative to achieve since the ‘Summary of Wonder Stump Road Community and Stakeholder Engagement’ was undertaken with no funding identified or anticipated for environmental studies, right-of-way acquisition, design or construction.”

However, Mack Eller had concerns with the report’s wording that “planning activity for Wonder Stump Road didn’t result in any promises or absolutes.”

“Maintenance has and will continue to require the periodic removal of trees and impacts to tree roots and canopies,” the report said. “Any future project along Wonder Stump Road will comply with the California Environmental Quality Act.”

“It left it a little open-ended in my opinion,” Mack Eller said.

However, he pointed to a suggestion he liked by District 1 Supervisor Roger Gitlin. Gitlin asked Del Norte County Probations Chief Lonnie Reyman, who was listening in via Zoom, if his department would be up to allowing probationers to “burn off hours” by keeping culverts free of roots and debris that could save a potential \$10,000 to \$20,000 to the county.

“I’d be happy to participate in a program that allows offenders to complete their community service hours,” Reyman replied.

Donna Eller summed up the community’s feelings for not removing the trees in an email to the supervisors. She said she goes out of her way to drive down through the tunnel to get to town. In the 15 years she’s lived there, Eller said the trees never jumped out to cause the only couple of accidents she knows of along the road.

“It’s never the tree’s fault,” Eller said.