

## Residents Stumped: Some along Wonder Stump Road fear county's plans

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Over the years, residents of Wonder Stump Road have expressed concerns that Del Norte County officials are moving toward an unnecessary widening of the road, all the while receiving assurances no such plan is in motion.

Their biggest ongoing concern, the say, is actions the county is taking without first notifying the residents.

“First, they started counting cars,” said Mac Eller, who’s lived on Wonder Stump Road, which is 3 to 4 miles from the north Crescent City line, since 2007. “Nobody said they were going to do that. They marked the trees. Nobody said a word about that to us in advance.”

When residents discovered the orange paint blots on trees along the lane in 2018, marking them for potential removal, Del Norte County Community Development Director Heidi Kunstal said at the time that the county’s roads superintendent flagged the trees as candidates for removal but that the project had neither been prioritized nor funded.

“It’s an opportunity for us to look at what type of options we have,” she told The Triplicate on June 19, 2018. “But one thing I’d like to make very clear is, we all know the importance of that canopy to people in our area.”

Jump ahead a year, when a surveyor showed up along Wonder Stump Road on July 12 without notice. Eller said he asked him why he was surveying the road and was told it was in case the county wants to widen it.

Residents’ fears peaked when they received a July 22 letter from the county seeking to “thoroughly discuss community and stakeholder concerns and solutions and the pros and cons of potential improvements to the County’s property better known as Wonder Stump Road.”

The letter outlined a process, including meetings and studies, to be completed by June 30, 2020. The result would be a summary of engagement that could be adopted by the Board of County Supervisors at that time.

Kunstal last week declined to comment further, saying she had nothing to add that wasn’t in the letter sent to the residents.

Wonderstump Road, which is about 2 miles long, 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.

“To make this two lanes, you’re going to have to take out a bunch of trees, which will ruin the aesthetics of our little tree tunnel,” Eller said. “And the speed limit will go from 25 to 45, (which is) not a good idea with people pulling out of their driveways.”

The county’s letter also cited its concern for trees being damaged by passing vehicles. But the local residents insist such accidents, few in number, have involved vehicles running into or clipping a tree as the result of operator error, not due to the trees’ close proximity.

“The county also says one of the concerns is for emergency vehicles,” said local resident Jim Coop. “In the 30 years I’ve lived here, I’ve seen maybe a handful (of emergency vehicles), and never a problem. Same with school buses. No problems.

“And they say this is a heavily trafficked road? Oh, my God! That is such a crock!”

On the other hand, said Coop, simply changing the lane’s signage would be an easy fix for some of the perceived problems.

“At each end of the tunnel is a squiggly arrow with an ‘island ahead’ sign,” he said. “Well, who cares about that sign? Just put up signs saying ‘turn your lights on, 25 miles per hour, one-way traffic yield to oncoming traffic.’ And that’s all you’ve got to do.”

Coop also disputes the county's stated concerns of roots overgrowing the ditches. "I can remember taking my kids, when we first got out here, walking up and down the tree tunnel," he said. "We noticed there were roots in the ditches. In 30 years, they might have grown 2 inches."

What's more, said Coop, he's spoken with a local bus driver who said her only concern navigating the tree tunnel was low-hanging branches that brushed her lights.

Area residents also dispute the county's letter that, "It is no longer feasible to safely perform maintenance activities while allowing traffic to navigate the work zone."

As long-time residents, they said, they've grown accustomed to navigating the narrow lane with the sparse traffic it receives. "That's the highlight of my day," Donna Eller said. "When I wait for a car or someone waits for me, to smile and wave to somebody might be the only encounter I have with somebody all day.

"And it's always a friendly encounter."

Residents said they've reached out to public officials and in return have received mixed messages. Eller said he's been told in conversations so much conflicting information that he's reached the point he doesn't know what to believe.

"I understand the need for the county to do research to determine whether or not we do need to put in a culvert or not," Eller said. "But you know what? They're just not being forthcoming.

"They're not being 'transparent,' is the key word with me."

One solution proposed by local residents to address the perceived danger their narrow lane presents to fire emergency vehicles is to install fire hydrants along the route. A city water main runs the length of Wonder Stump, they said.

"They want us to come up with solutions? None of us are engineers," said Eller. "We just live here. But that's one (solution) right there."

As for the county's concerns about flooding, said Eller, he's never experienced flooding issues in the dozen years he's lived there. "So building a culvert along the road to address flooding doesn't make sense, either."

In a heavy storm, Wonder Stump Road can become covered with a thick blanket of pine needles. The clean-up can clog the adjoining ditches. But that's simply a maintenance issue, said the nearby residents. They've never seen the road blocked or impassable.

"I want to be proactive," said Eller, "and not reactive after they've gone in and done what they're going to do."

Meantime, their message has reached outside the state's borders. Daniel Russ, now living in Sparks, Nevada, has had family ties to the Wonder Stump community dating back to the 1800s. When he heard of the community's concerns through the Facebook page Save Wonderstump, he contacted the page's creator, Donna Eller, to brainstorm ways to get their message a wider audience.

“I decided to start a petition, to see what would happen,” Russ said.

Found at <https://bit.ly/2ZCCaOp>, his petition caught the attention of people from beyond the region, with the number of signatures currently nearing 4,000. “Personally, I didn’t expect to get 100,” Russ said.

The group’s plan is to present the petition, with an organized front by the residents, during the next County Board of Supervisors meeting, on Aug. 13.

At the same time, Mac Eller said, given the current alignment of the county’s board, he fears the landowners’ concerns will fall on deaf ears.

If that happens, said Coop, “I’ll invite in groups like the Sierra Club and the Save the Redwoods Organization.

“I never thought I’d approach that level of activism. But I know we won’t have any problem at all finding groups in Humboldt County to come up here and support our efforts to maintain the road the way it is right now.”

He mused that he hadn’t thought he’d have anything in common with the stereotypical “treehugger.” “Whenever I saw somebody protesting on TV, I was like, ‘Get a life. Don’t you work?’

“Well, here we are. We’re making a stand because it means something to us.

“If you allow for more traffic, we’re going to get more traffic. If you remove the trees, you remove what makes Wonder Stump Lane special.”

“One of the neighbors said the tree tunnel is where the trees hold hands for us to pass through together,” said Donna Eller, “forever in peace.”