

## **Fire On the Mountain**

### **The Closure of Old Howell Mountain Road: The Effect on Angwin Residents**

**Report Date: May 31, 2022**



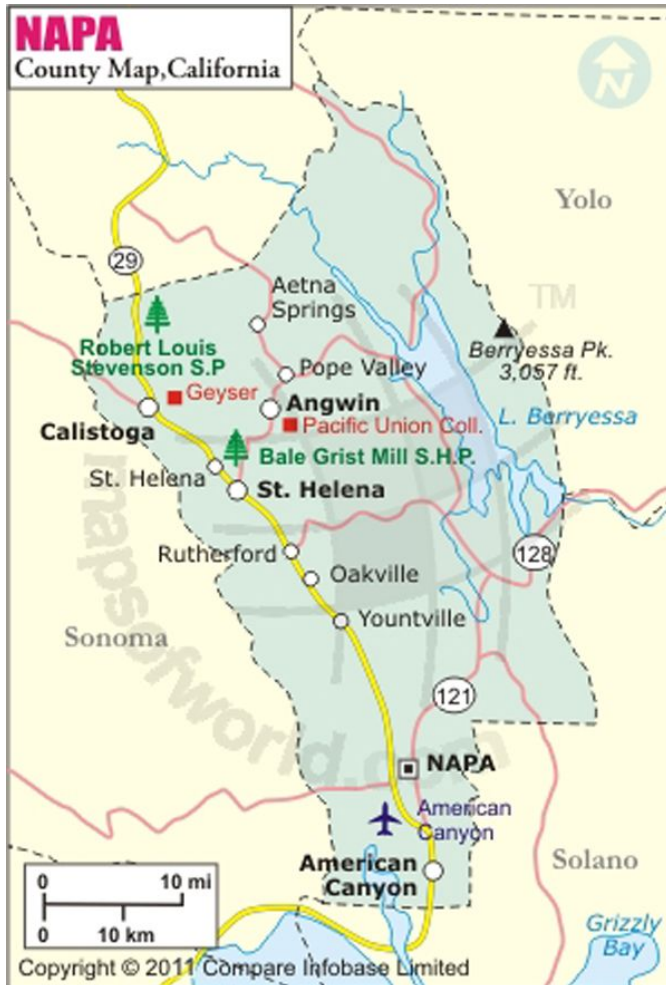
AP Photo Glass Fire September 27, 2020

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## SUMMARY

Angwin is an unincorporated mountain / forest community of approximately 2,600 residents, and a college with a varying population of approximately 1,200 students and staff. The nearby



community of Deer Park has a resident population of 1,300, a 150-bed hospital with staff and patients. The area also has a large transient agricultural workforce supporting the surrounding wine industry.

The primary road servicing the area from the west to/from St. Helena is Deer Park Road. Historically, Old Howell Mountain Road, constructed approximately 130 years ago, has been a far less travelled alternative route. It is narrow, winding and steep; prone to wash outs during winter storms which historically, the county has repaired. The road is not viewed by the population as a major throughfare, but as an alternate emergency exit route in case of fire or other disaster.

A severe storm in January 2017 heavily damaged Old Howell Mountain Road which was subsequently closed and not repaired. The damage to the road was extensive as the hillside itself is unstable.

While multiple agencies concurred with the decision not to repair the road, the local community believes they were not adequately

informed of, or involved in, the decision which may have a serious impact on their ability to evacuate the area if required to do so.

The Napa Valley Board of Supervisors should reach out to all the local area populations and conduct an onsite, public forum to fully discuss the issues with repairing the road and address their concerns over potential emergency evacuation issues.

## BACKGROUND

In April 2021, the 2021-2022 Grand Jury became aware that Angwin community residents were expressing concern and surprise at what they saw as Napa County's failure to repair an important emergency evacuation route, especially in the light of increasingly dangerous future fire seasons in the area. As a result the Grand Jury decided to initiate an investigation into three issues: 1) the adequacy of Angwin's evacuation routes during a wildfire (in particular, Old Howell Mountain Road); 2) whether Angwin residents had been made aware of available evacuation routes; and 3)

whether Angwin residents had been informed of the reasons for the County’s decision not to re-open Old Howell Mountain Road.

The concerns of the Angwin’s residents centered on their ability to evacuate Angwin in the eventuality of a wildfire similar to those in 2020, the Sonoma-Lake-Napa Unit Fire (LNU) and the Glass Fire. Angwin can be exited by Howell Mountain Road and Ink Grade Road from the northeast, leading to Pope Valley, and by Deer Park Road to the southwest. However, the LNU Fire required the closures of both Howell Mountain Road and Ink Grade Road. This left Deer Park Road as the only route out of Angwin, providing an exit toward the southwest and St. Helena. During the Glass Mountain Fire, however, Deer Park Road was closed for several days, requiring residents to exit Angwin on Howell Mountain Road to the northeast. Old Howell Mountain Road would have provided an alternative evacuation route, had it been available at that time.

Currently, Old Howell Mountain Road has been declared permanently unavailable to residents. It is barricaded near the top of the road where it meets Deer Park Road, and also near the bottom, about 1.4 miles from its intersection with Silverado Trail, near Pope Street. Cal Fire and Napa County Public Works Office of Emergency Management have advised the County Board of Supervisors that the road is unsafe because of a loss of 75% of the road surface in a January 2017 landslide. They note that the road is narrow, winding, and because of the heavily wooded area below it, a virtual “death trap” in the event of a wildfire. Nonetheless, many Angwin residents see the road as a critical evacuation route in the case of a fire or emergency, should all other current routes be blocked. This difference of view became the focus of the Grand Jury investigation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Grand Jury began its Angwin Emergency Evacuation to determine when, or if, Old Howell Mountain Road in Angwin, closed since 2017, would be repaired and open for any vehicle use. Importantly, the Grand Jury wanted to explore whether the road closure had been adequately explained to the community and if they were offered an opportunity to question the decision in an open-forum environment.

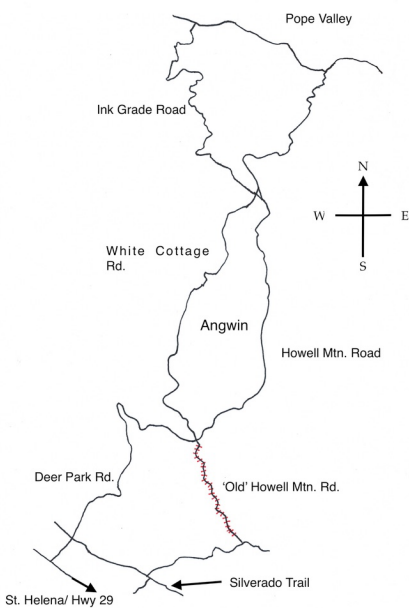
Over the course of the next six months, the Grand Jury interviewed seven individuals identified as having either direct or indirect knowledge of the road closure. Those county personnel questioned included representatives from the Napa County Department of Public Works, Office of Emergency Services, and the County Board of Supervisors. Others interviewed included a representative from the fire station in Angwin and Angwin residents actively involved in community matters.

In addition to the interviews, the Napa Valley *Register*, the St Helena *Star* and the *Weekly Calistogan* newspapers were searched for articles and columns about the closure. Letters to the Editor were also reviewed for indications of Angwin residents’ concerns. The Napa County website for the Board of Supervisors was examined for agenda items and/or minutes from Board meetings where the road closure was discussed.

**DISCUSSION**

A severe storm of January 2017 brought excessive rainfall to Napa County. There were landslides and road closures throughout the county. One of the roads heavily damaged was Old Howell Mountain Road, the only route, other than Deer Park Road, between Angwin and St. Helena. Deer Park Road is far safer and more widely used than Old Howell Mountain Road, which has suffered road closures due to washouts many times over the 130 years it had been in use. The 2017 road closure was the third from storm damage after 2010, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers shored up and repaired the road. Napa County Public Works repaired the road again in 2014 when storm damage washed out the road’s surface. After each of the road repairs, Old Howell Mountain Road was reopened. However, the severity of the 2017 storm washed out 75% of the roadway surface in sections, according to a December 8, 2020 report to the Board of Supervisors, and the road has not been reopened since.

Map of Angwin



Like many mountain roads in Napa County, Old Howell Mountain Road is narrow and winding, proceeding up to a steep incline. At many points there is a rock face on one side and a steep drop-off on the other. Angwin residents have become accustomed to the road being closed periodically for repairs, something which has happened multiple times in the last twenty years. After the January 2017 washout, however, Old Howell Mountain Road was not repaired. Many residents expected that it would be. Later in the summer of 2017, wild fires in the area increased local residents’ sense of urgency about the need reopen the road for use in an emergency evacuation.

The Camp Fire in the town of Paradise, California occurred in November 2018. People of Angwin followed the fire with a special sense of dread. The deaths of many of the 85 people tragically lost

in that fire were due, in part, to a lack of adequate evacuation roads. The situation was similar to that which Angwin residents feel they might face, since the only current evacuation route to St. Helena, to the southwest, is Deer Park Road. Residents, fearing a potential tragedy like the Camp Fire, have argued that Old Howell Mountain Road should be repaired and available for use.

Angwin is surrounded by forest and is approximately 1,800 feet in elevation. It is home to approximately 2,600 residents. In addition to the residents, Angwin is home to Pacific Union College, with a student population between 900-1200 students, and a staff and faculty of 250. Angwin has one preschool, one public elementary school, one private elementary school, and one private high school. Angwin's public high school students attend St. Helena High School. Angwin has an all volunteer Fire Department, and a small shopping area comprised of many businesses. There is also a large, partially transient, agricultural workforce that drives to and through Angwin to access the many vineyards and wineries in the vicinity. Nearby Deer Park has a population of 1,300 residents. St. Helena Hospital in Deer Park has a staff of approximately 1,050 employees and 297 volunteers, and has 151 beds for patients.

Most of Angwin and the surrounding area of Howell Mountain were under an advisory evacuation order during the Atlas/Tubbs Fire of October 2017. During the 2020 LNU Complex and Glass Fires, all of Angwin was under mandatory evacuation for a total of 21 days. Those evacuations happened without injury or loss of life.

Since the January 2017 closure of Old Howell Mountain Road, residents of Angwin and nearby communities have expressed their desire to have Old Howell Mountain re-opened, if only as an emergency evacuation route. The *Napa Register* has printed several letters to the editor on the topic; residents have written to Board of Supervisors; and an Op-Ed article was written in the *Register* recommending that money be spent to repair the road. One *Napa Register* letter to the editor received a printed response from the Napa County Public Works Office quoting a figure of \$3 million to repair the road (this would amount to one-third of the the Napa County Public Works' annual budget) and explaining that adequate funds were not available to support a repair of such magnitude.

The Grand Jury's research indicates that the \$3 million repair estimate was incomplete, because it only included the cost of patching the surface of the roadway where the asphalt has washed away. Local authorities interviewed by the Grand Jury, including from Napa County Public Works, Cal Fire, Napa County Fire Department and local road construction companies, all stated that the issues that would need to be addressed to repair Old Howell Mountain Road are far more serious than just patching missing asphalt and would cost far more than \$3 million. All of these experts described the impracticality of repairing the 130 year-old road. Reasons cited included the fact that it was built on soft soil, has had multiple asphalt repairs over the years, and includes a three-mile section that is starting to slip down hill. In short, the road has lost its structural integrity. A 2020 report from Napa County Public Works stated that even if repairs happened to the damaged section of road, there could be no assurance that the next major storm would not damage another portion of the road.

Based on these recommendations, the Napa County Board of Supervisors voted in December 2020 not to repair Old Howell Mountain Road. This Grand Jury agrees with that decision, even though it also recognizes that many local residents disagree with the decision. These residents are

concerned that devastating wildfires are likely to become an increasingly frequent occurrence in the area and they believe that multiple evacuation routes are necessary for the safety of residents, workers and students.

During its investigation the Grand Jury spoke to multiple Angwin residents, some of whom felt that the closure was the proper decision. Nonetheless, no matter which side they took, nearly all felt they had not been given an adequate opportunity to hear directly from the Board and to provide their input. Similarly no individual interviewed remembered that they were notified in advance about the Board of Supervisors' vote on the road closure.<sup>1</sup> The decision, which affected so many, appears to have come as a surprise to most residents. The goal of this report is to bring clarity and understanding about Napa County's decision to close Old Howell Mountain Road.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1. Many Angwin residents interviewed stated they did not recall having received notice prior to the Napa County Board of Supervisors' 'yes vote' in favor of keeping Old Howell Mountain Road closed. The Grand Jury is aware that under the Brown Act, no more than 72 hours' notice of any agenda item is required. But despite repeated efforts, the Grand Jury was unable to confirm that even so minimal a notice occurred. Moreover, given the level of local concern about Old Howell Mountain Road, more prominent notice and even the opportunity for a public hearing would have been appropriate. Had this happened, years of concern and confusion could have been avoided.
- F2. These residents believe that they did not receive an explanation of why Old Howell Mountain was not repaired and they were not adequately represented in the decision-making process.
- F3. The residents of Angwin have been impacted multiple times by evacuations due to wildfires and want to have as many evacuation routes as possible, in order to avoid a tragedy like the Paradise, California scenario.
- F4. The Napa County Board of Supervisors caused unnecessary mistrust in their local government by not sufficiently communicating with Angwin-area residents regarding the closure of Old Howell Mountain Road.
- F5. Multiple agencies, including , Napa County Office of Emergency Services, Napa County Public Works, CalFire, Napa County Fire Department and local construction companies have deemed the road unrepairable, due to a nearly three-mile long section of unstable ground and other hazards; however, the Napa County Office of Emergency Services and the Napa

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<sup>1</sup> Only after careful research was the Grand Jury able to find a general reference to Howell Mountain Road on the December 8, 2020 Board of Supervisors meeting agenda. Item 10B included the following: "Director of Public Works requests discussion and possible direction on the status of Old Howell Mountain Road." Supporting Documents and a Roads 4 Year Plan were also referenced. Public comments by one resident were not read but added subsequently after the meeting. There was no mention of a final vote.

County Board of Supervisors did not effectively communicate to the public their reasons for their decision not to repair the road.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1. The Napa County Office of Emergency Services should hold a public forum with Angwin residents and explain the reasons for the closure of Old Howell Mountain Road. Other relevant agencies should be invited to attend.
- R2. During this forum, the Napa County Office of Emergency Services should explain feasibility and potential cost of repairing the road.
- R3. The forum should provide residents an opportunity to have their questions answered and to express their opinions about the decision to close Old Howell Mountain Road. This forum should take place before September 1, 2022.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSES**

The following responses, required pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, are requested from the following agency head within 60 days:

- Napa County CEO, for Napa County Office of Emergency Services  
F1, F2, F3, F4  
R1, R2, R3

## **INVITED RESPONSES**

- Angwin Volunteer Fire Department Fire Chief  
F1, F2, F3, F4  
R1, R2, R3
- President, Angwin Community Council  
F1, F2, F3, F4  
R1, R2, R3
- Napa County Board of Supervisors  
F1-F5



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