

Wildfire Evacuation Frequently Asked Questions

Based on discussions during the September 10 & 15 Wildfire Evacuation Webinars

Alerts

1. How will I know when to evacuate?

You may receive an alert on your cell phone or landline phone from the Town's two Emergency Alert systems. Someone (fire dept., deputy, CERT volunteer, neighbor) may come to your door to tell you to evacuate. You may see a Town notice to evacuate on Nextdoor.com or the Town's Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/TownofLosAltosHills/>) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/townoflah>).

2. How do I register for the Town's Emergency Alert Systems?

Go to the [Town website](#). It's important that you sign up for BOTH Alert SCC and Nixle. Both registration forms are on the same page. Make sure you include your email and any landline phones when you set up your account. You can also go to the main Town [website](#) and click on "In Case of Emergency" to register for both notification systems.

Don't wait for an alert. If you feel unsafe, leave and watch from a distance.

3. What if it feels like the fire is close but I haven't received a notification?

Hopefully, one of the methods listed in question #1 will notify you but sometimes fires move so quickly there is no time to warn you. If you feel unsafe, leave and get out of town to wait and monitor the situation. As soon as possible, the Sheriff's Office or the Town will provide information through one of the Town's communication methods.

4. What will the Alert Notification say?

There are two types of notifications.

- Evacuation *Warning* – Means get ready to leave if things get worse. (If you feel unsafe, you may evacuate when you receive an evacuation warning).
- Evacuation *Order* – Means leave now. No more time to pack.

5. I registered for Alert SCC and Nixle but I don't receive messages all the time.

If you set your smart phone to "Do Not Disturb" at night, you won't receive alerts unless you add Nixle and Alert SCC to your contacts and program the phone to bypass the Do Not Disturb. Add Alert SCC (408-808-7871) and Nixle (650-823-0055).

Also include the alert system emails noreply@everbridge.net or no-reply@emails.nixle.com so they don't go to junk email.

6. Is there any effort to finetune the evacuation warning/order so that they are received only by those who live in the evacuation area so as to minimize unnecessary panic?

If we have to evacuate a portion of the town, we will tell the whole town what is happening so that you can stay out of the area. When the fire department completes their [ZoneHaven](#) project, you will know what Zone you are in. When there is an evacuation order announced for a Zone, there should be no question about whether or not you are included. It's important to stay informed. Just because you are not currently being evacuated, doesn't mean there won't be a second or third evacuation order that includes your Zone.

7. What if the power is out and our phones are no longer charged? We can't receive alerts?

You'll need to rely on a neighbor to notify you. Purchase a backup battery charger. You can also purchase a NOAA weather radio with Wireless Emergency Alert. They have a battery backup that will allow you to receive messages when the power is out.

8. We don't have cell phones -- only 'land lines.' Why do you insist on cell phones?

You do not need to have a cell phone. You may also register your landline phones with Nixle and Alert SCC; however, text messages process faster than voice messages. You won't be the first to know about the evacuation. Hopefully a neighbor will alert you when they receive a text message. Once you evacuate, be sure you have a printed list of phone numbers so you can borrow a phone to make calls and have a list of websites as a reference to get information about the status of the emergency and when you can go home.

9. Will the use of ZoneHaven include maps that are easier to read?

[ZoneHaven](#) is a software that the Fire Department is developing to create evacuation zones in Town. Every home will have a pre-identified evacuation zone designation and Emergency Alerts will specify which Zones are being ordered to evacuate. Yes, there should be a PDF map capability so it's easier to read. Plus you will know what your zone is so you will know for sure if you are supposed to evacuate.

Communication

10. How will I receive status update information after I have evacuated?

The Town website has a page called [Communication During Emergencies](#). It explains how to access all of the Town's communication methods including Facebook, Twitter, Foothill College KFJC 89.7FM Radio Station, amateur radio and local radio stations. This page also lists the Trusted Sources of Information from our Partner Agencies.

11. What are Trusted Sources of Information?

Trusted sources are the organizations who are responding to the emergency in some capacity. The information posted on their sites will be more accurate than anything you are given by family or friends. You can find the Trusted Sources document in the Town website's "[Communication During Emergencies section](#)".

12. I don't have social media so I can't look at the Trusted Source's social media pages.

You should be able to click on the links and access the information without having a Facebook or Twitter account.

13. If my cell phone battery dies, how will I report emergencies?

There are several options. Keep a car charger for your cell phone nearby so you can plug it in to your car and call 9-1-1. Check online for battery backup chargers that can recharge your phone several times during an extended outage. If you have no way to report an emergency, flag down a passerby or go to a neighbor's house to see if they have a working phone.

Evacuation

14. What are the evacuation routes from my home?

Evacuation routes are not pre-designated. It depends on where the fire is. Every resident is responsible for knowing all ways out of their neighborhood (driving, walking, bicycle) and where those streets/paths lead. We're happy to help brainstorm routes with you. The Evacuation Order should identify general evacuation routes for the specific event. If it's not in the Evacuation Order, it will be communicated shortly thereafter on Nixle or Alert SCC. You can put your address into Google Maps and look at all of the roads and paths leading out of your neighborhood. ALL of them are potential evacuation routes – depending on where the threat is located.

15. How does the Fire Department and Sheriff's Office decide what areas to evacuate?

They make determinations based on roads and landmarks. SCCFD has a grant to develop a program called ZoneHaven which will place each home inside a specific zone. They will then use the zone designations to evacuate people so there is no question about who should leave. Even if you are not part of a designated Zone, you may leave if you feel it would be safer for you to be out of the active fire area.

16. Are there any pre-designated evacuation check in areas?

The Town has identified possible evacuation areas (schools, colleges, community centers, etc.) We are discussing agreements with Cupertino, Palo Alto and Los Altos to use some properties in their jurisdictions. Our goal is to get you out of the area and away from the smoke. The actual evacuation areas, for any event, are decided based on where the particular fire is spreading. If you chose to go to another location, check the Town website and social media for a phone number or other method that you can use to check in.

17. Do you have a list of what should be in the "Go-Bag"? What should I take?

What you take will depend on how much time you have. There is a list on the Town's Wildfire webpage called Town Evacuation Preparedness that has a long list of items you can think about taking. There is also a list on the [CalFire website](#). Prioritize your personal list and consider the size of your car to ensure everything you want to take will fit.

18. Can I evacuate on the Fire Access road?

Fire Access roads are for fire apparatus. If the Fire Department decides that the Fire Access road is the only way out of your neighborhood, they will escort you out. Going on the Fire Access road on your own can put you in extreme danger. The Fire Department doesn't expect to see small pedestrians or cars on these roads – especially at night. In addition, your car could get stuck and you may block the way for a fire engine.

19. What is a safe refuge area?

If you are unable to get out, because fire or other obstructions are blocking the road, you may need to find a place you can access on foot. It should be an area cleared of vegetation or have a pool or other body of water you can get into. Check Google maps for areas around your home. Please leave early so you are not faced with this situation.

20. What about traffic jams during evacuation?

Roads are not designed to allow everyone to be on the road at once. As a result, there will be traffic jams. There are two ways to minimize the problem. 1) Leave the area before an evacuation is ordered. 2) Take only one car and put as many people/pets from your neighborhood into it as possible. The fewer cars on the road, the less the traffic will back up.

21. I do not drive. How will I get out?

Your best option is to make arrangements with neighbors or family to assist you. You may also be able to make arrangements with a transportation company. Call them as soon as there is a possibility of fire and confirm they can immediately respond with no delays. As a last resort, dial 9-1-1 and tell the dispatcher where you are. If first responders can get to you, they can assist.

22. Do you have resources to help with handicapped persons evacuating?

The Town or fire department can help handicapped people develop an evacuation plan to get out safely. Everyone is responsible for developing their own plan to evacuate. We are happy to help anyone come up with their plan. If you do not have a plan, you can call 9-1-1 and first responders will try to assist you. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that they will be able to help. When individuals don't have a plan and responders are called to assist, it takes resources away from fighting the fire. We are all one team. You make sure you have an evacuation plan and the fire department will make sure the fire gets put out.

23. What steps will be taken to evacuate the horses and animals in Byrne Park and Hidden Villa?

The owner of the horses is responsible for evacuating them unless they've developed a plan with Byrne Park or Hidden Villa. Santa Clara County Animal Control has a large animal evacuation team that could assist as a last resort.

24. If a homeowner evacuates early, what's the best way to notify first responders the house is empty?

Fire has a system of marking if the residents are gone. If a homeowner evacuated early, you could post a note. **The Sheriff's Office will go door to the door. They will create a list and we'll keep track. >> How will you know if they don't answer – but don't hear you? In the shower, etc?**

25. If a check-in location is where we go, how are things being handled given COVID pandemic and physical distancing requirements?

We have a specific COVID plan the involves sending you to a large parking area (like a mall, college, community center) and having you stay in your cars. Staff and volunteers will come around to check you in and then you can go to your shelter location. We're also planning on what to do if it happens on a very hot day. Where you go will depend on what is available when the emergency actually happens.

26. Instead of going to a check-in location, can we provide the info to the Town online?

Right now, we don't have an online method to receive the check-in information but we are working on it. We will also set up a hotline (not immediately) so that there is a way to tell us where you are.

27. What if we know that someone did not evacuate or is missing?

We do need to know that everyone got out. If you know that someone did not evacuate, call 9-1-1 and give them the address. If you know people are missing or your family was separated during evacuation, let the Town know. We will work with the Sheriff's Office and the Red Cross to help find missing people.

28. When there's an earthquake, it's recommended to turn off the gas to the house. Is it also recommended to turn off the gas (if there's time) in case of a wildfire?

Actually, you are NOT supposed to turn off the natural gas after an Earthquake unless you smell natural gas, hear a hissing sound or see the meter dial wildly spinning. For Wildfire Evacuation, you may turn off the gas before you leave - if you have time and you know how. We can show you how (in advance).

29. What are the precautions in place to prevent looting when an evacuation occurs?

When the Sheriff's Office evacuates an area, a portion of the deputies are assigned to stay back and provide security and keep people from trying to go back into the area.

30. What if I don't want to leave?

If the Sheriff's Office comes to your door and you do not want to leave, give the deputy the name of your next-of-kin in case you perish. Any children under 18 years old, in the home, may legally be evacuated without parent permission.

31. My house has a locked gate. How will officers get to my door?

Contact the Town to discuss solutions.

32. What if fires occur on private streets?

Fire has no boundaries so the processes are the same regardless of whether it's a public or private street. Everyone will be ordered to evacuate and the fire department will fight to control the fire.

33. Do both zip codes 94022 and 94024 receive the same evacuation resources?

LAHCFD covers both Zip Codes. County Fire serves both Zip Codes. Evacuation process will be the same for both. Los Altos Hills works closely with Los Altos to ensure

Defensible Space/Vegetation Removal

34. What makes a "defensible space"?

Defensible space means creating a landscape, on your property, that is less likely to catch fire and spread. The [Firesafe Council Website](#) has guidelines for clearing a defensible space. For the 5' around your home some things you can do include 1) making sure gutters are free from debris, all combustibles (including bark in planters) are away from the structure and surface litter, such as leaves, pine needles, twigs, bark, cones and pods are removed, There are additional requirements for 30' and 100' such as removing lower tree branches at least six feet from the ground, landscaping with fire resistant plants and cutting grass down to a maximum height of 4 inches. Mow before 10 a.m. and never on hot or windy days.

35. Is the program to check defensible space organized by Los Altos Hills County Fire District (LAHCFD) still going on?

Every January they send out flyers reminding residents to remove vegetation. Fire engines go out to the addresses, do evaluations, and leave door hangers advising residents of possible violations that they may have on their property. If cleanup is not done by the property owner, the Town or County can perform cleanup activities and a lien put on the property. If you need help finding contractors to assist with tree removal, LAHCFD can provide leads for a competitive bid process for contractors working with LAHCFD on chipping and fuel breaks.

LAHCFD and the Town want to establish a holistic approach to fire prevention. It includes a brush removal program – very popular and effective, home hardening by creating the defensible space (which also makes the home a possible temporary refuge), creating a personal evacuation plan, discussing with family and making a Go-Bag.

36. What is the current town policy on dead tree removal? If we see a dead tree should we report it somewhere?

If the tree is on private property, it is the homeowner's responsibility to remove it. If it is on public property – contact the Town. If unincorporated, contact Santa Clara County. There is no vegetation enforcement outside the 30-100 feet around structures.

37. Is the fire department able to assess properties in LAH for risk? If not, is there some other person, organization, or institution who can provide such a service?

Each year (around March) we get a list of residences in the Threat Zone. We go around and evaluate the properties. Some we need to get permission to enter private property. Looking for defensible space clearances, looking for Knox Boxes with gate keys, making sure there are good turn arounds for fire apparatus, making sure there is good clearance, making sure there are spark arresters and that vents are covered.

Does this need to be clarified?

Chief Falarski said Fire Prevention can schedule an appointment to have a property assessed. The Santa Clara County Fire Safe Council also provides this service.

Now to have your home evaluated on how to properly "harden" the home, should be done by a certified person. We do have some people who are certified to do that, but it is dependent on schedules and availability. Fire Safe Council also has people that can do this.

Our Prevention Bureau would handle all these requests.

38. There are many open preserves, creeks and open spaces in the town that are densely vegetated and close to residential areas which present potential fire threat. What are some of the efforts the town is taking on to prevent wildfire opportunities while we make ourselves prepared for that?

Mid Peninsula Open Space District is aggressively working to reduce fuels including having controlled burns. There is a [panel discussion video](#) that was created about two years ago. It's on the Town website. If you see potential hazards on public property, let us know. Sending a picture is helpful. We will identify who is responsible for clearing.

39. Can Town officials rate each street and neighborhood for fire danger? Can the Town proactively reduce the fire danger by tagging properties with dead trees and bushes and fining those property owners that do not clean up their properties. This Town can be fire safe if there is aggressive forest management.

40. When we remodeled, we changed our shake roof to a composite roof and have fire sprinklers throughout our house and garage. What is the use if our neighbor has two tall dead pine trees next to our lot?

We don't have to evacuate anyone if everyone keeps their homes maintained and nothing catches on fire. Please reach out to the Town or Fire Department if you're having problems with a neighbor.

41. What to do about neighbors that blow all their leaves to my property fence?

Call the Town and explain the problem. The Sheriff's Office will be happy to come out and try to resolve the dispute.

42. There are a serious number of dead and near dead pine trees, eucalyptus and dry coyote bush throughout the Town. These were major sources of fire in Santa Cruz. Why aren't they being cleared?

We are talking about wildland and wilderness areas. Inspections are helpful but only if there is some remediation or plan that goes along with it. Most of those trees belong to private residences and it is the homeowner's responsibility. Each individual must manage their own property to prevent fires. We have FireWise Communities and Neighborhood Networks that LAHCFD are working on to help promote these activities.

Miscellaneous

43. If your pool has a fire access valve, should you tell the fire department so they know?

A fire access valve is a great resource for the fire department to use. They do property inspections to check for locked gates and do note if you have an access valve. It wouldn't hurt to go to your local fire station and tell them. Then the fire department can check it and make sure it is compatible with their equipment.

44. What does CERT do? How do I know what CERT member is in charge of my area and who do I contact?

CERT means Community Emergency Response Team and is a nationwide volunteer training program. It's run by the Los Altos Hills County Fire District and the program is taught by Santa Clara County Fire Department staff. CERT members are Town residents who are committed to helping during disasters. The Town is divided into Zones and CERTs initially assist within their own Zone. Some Zones do not have any volunteers. Contact LAHCFD. They can let you know if there are volunteers in your area. We do not have enough CERT volunteers. There are many different roles to fill. Ask how you can help.

45. Are there any CERT Zone specific group email lists, Facebook groups for Los Altos Hills?

Some neighborhoods have created their own email groups with neighbors living around them. Nextdoor.com is set up to encompass the larger CERT Zones so that everyone within that Zone can work together. CERT members do not usually coordinate their own Zones because they have other responsibilities. We ask that other residents take the lead to assist with the communication and coordination of neighborhoods. The Town can provide safety training and

guidance for how to set up a neighborhood group. The Town also has an amateur radio team set up by the Town's Emergency Communications Committee (ECC) that provides a reliable communication "net" around the Town during emergencies.

46. If I have a few fire hoses, shall I give those to the local department?

Santa Clara County Fire Department has all the hose that they need. Thank you for offering.

47. If you have a metal roof, should you let County Fire know?

Fire departments treat all roofs the same, it's just how they access them is different. You can let them know about the roof but with so many resources coming in from out of the area to assist, they may not get the message.

48. Where is the LAH web page to find the emergency links?

<https://www.losaltoshills.ca.gov/503/Wildfire>

49. How can we help fire evacuees? Are donations of food or clothing etc. needed?

This question comes up with every disaster because people want to help. People want to give food and bags of clothing but the jurisdiction managing the fire does not have the manpower to receive and sort all the donations while they're in the middle of supporting an evacuated community. We like to give the evacuees some control over what they are getting so most supporting nonprofit organizations give gift cards or cash to allow evacuees to make their own purchases of new items to help them get back to normal instead of feeling out of control. For this reason, the thing that is needed the most is money. Sometimes organizations like The Post in Los Altos were able to do a very good job of receiving and sorting donations. We don't recommend that because it isn't always that successful. If you look on major support websites like the Red Cross, they will say "please do not bring any donations unless they are specifically requested". It's better to gather information about what is available and then notify people that their donation is needed. Otherwise you can end up with piles of donations that no one can use and it ends up going to the Goodwill or to the dump. We don't want anyone to be upset that their donation didn't get put to use. [Here is a video that explains the problem.](#)