

Could Diamond Bar become another Camp Fire tragedy?

Diamond Bar residents have only 4 streets, often gridlocked, and 2 perpetually clogged freeways by which to escape a fire or earthquake.

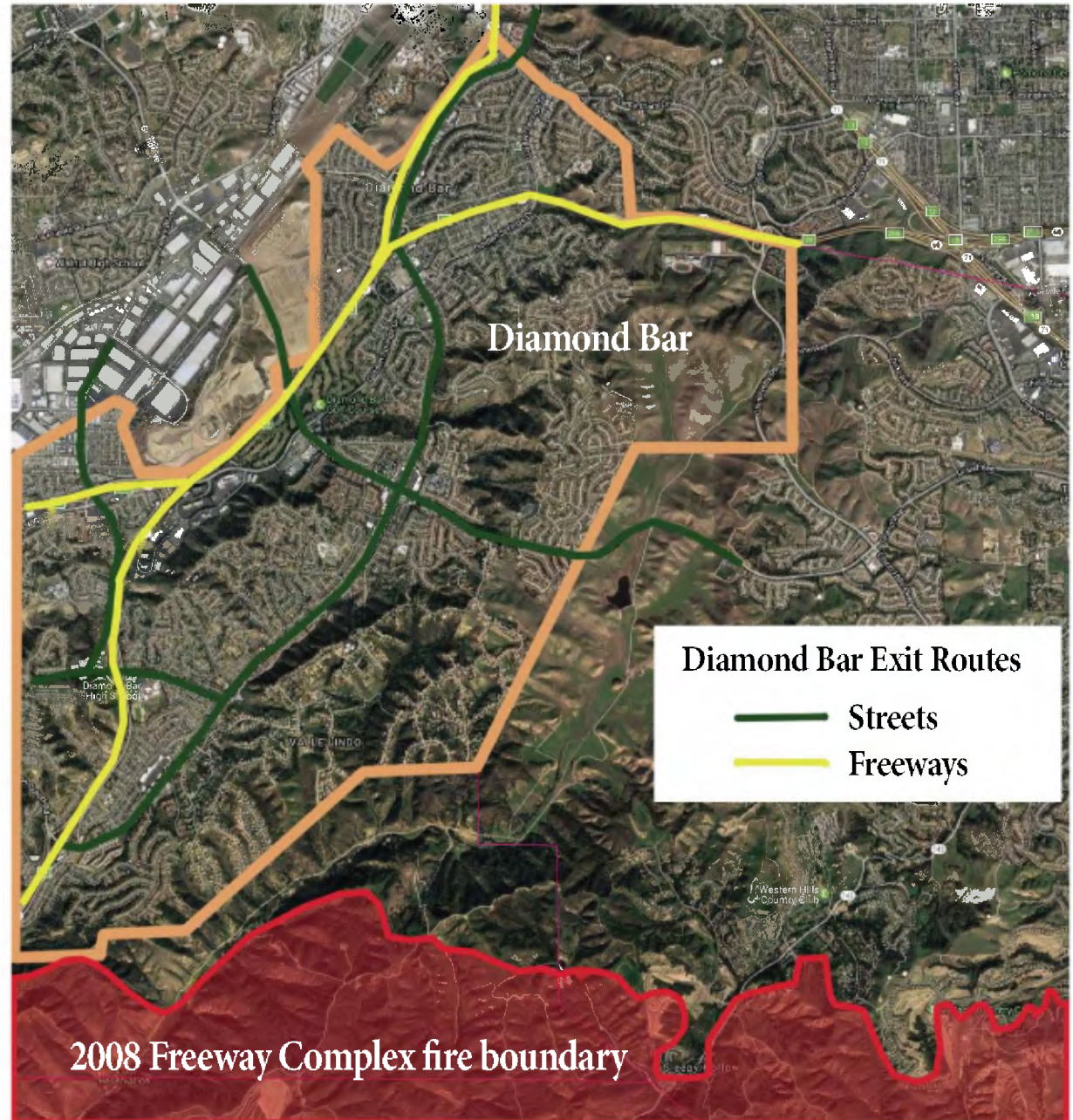
When the Camp Fire swept through the Northern California town of Paradise on the morning of November 8th, residents had no time to escape. The mounting death toll is largely the result of a failed evacuation through only 4 escape routes. (See Los Angeles Times articles describing this disaster below.)

As of this writing, 76 people are currently known dead from the Camp Fire and 1300 people are unaccounted for.

Responsible Land Use has grave concerns about the seriousness of Diamond Bar's fire danger.

In 2008, Diamond Bar came very close to having a similar tragedy occur in our city. Only because the strong northerly winds just happened to moderate along a ridge south of town, were firefighters able to lay a down line of retardant and save our city from the Freeway Complex fire.

Had the winds continued to blow the fire through Diamond Bar, large numbers of people would have perished, unable to escape the flames.



Temperatures are hotter now, combustible fuels are drier and fires spread faster than they did ten years ago.

Paradise had a population of 26,682 before its fire. Diamond Bar has 56,665, more than twice as many, in an area twenty percent smaller than Paradise. Like Paradise we have a limited number of exit routes.

Based on Diamond' Bar's topography, our population density compared to Paradise, our scarcity of escape routes, and the lessons from the Camp fire in Paradise, it is safe to say that if a fire similar to the Camp Fire ever blew through Diamond Bar, especially during a rush hour, safely evacuating our residents would be impossible.

General Plan language concerns:

We strongly recommend that policies be added to the safety element which address the creation of evacuation plans, including the creation of evacuation in place plans.

The city's revised and updated policies discuss updating building codes, educating citizens about fire danger, and working with fire agencies, etc, but nothing is mentioned about the creation of fire evacuation plans or the creation of evacuation in place fire plans.



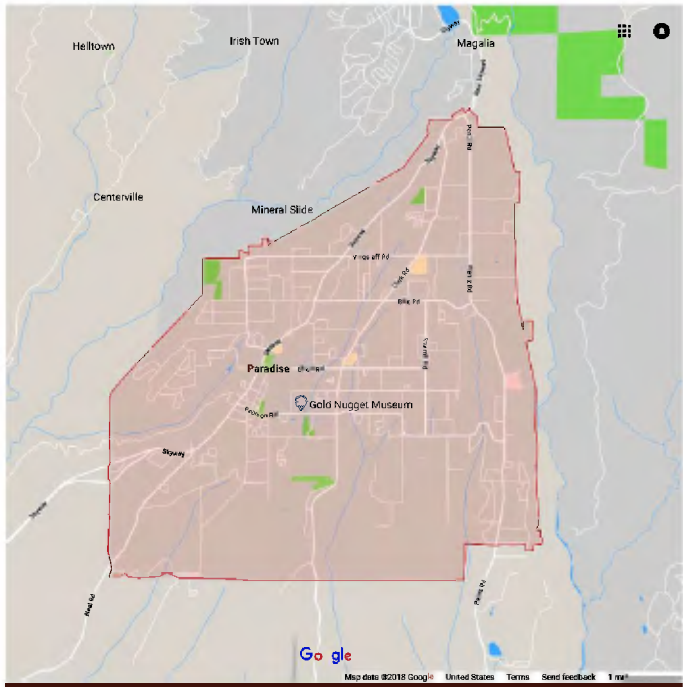
Freeway Complex Fire, viewed from Silver Hawk and Santaquin Dr. in Diamond Bar, November 16, 2008.



DC-10 laying down a line of fire retardant on the ridge behind the Country.



Diamond Bar



Paradise

Left: Diamond Bar and Paradise shown at the same scale.

Diamond Bar has over twice as many people with fewer escape routes in a smaller area.

Images from Google Maps.

Right: Notice that the Camp fire began about 6:30 am. Notice also that it reached the outskirts of Paradise, over 8 miles away, at 7:59. Only an hour and a half later.

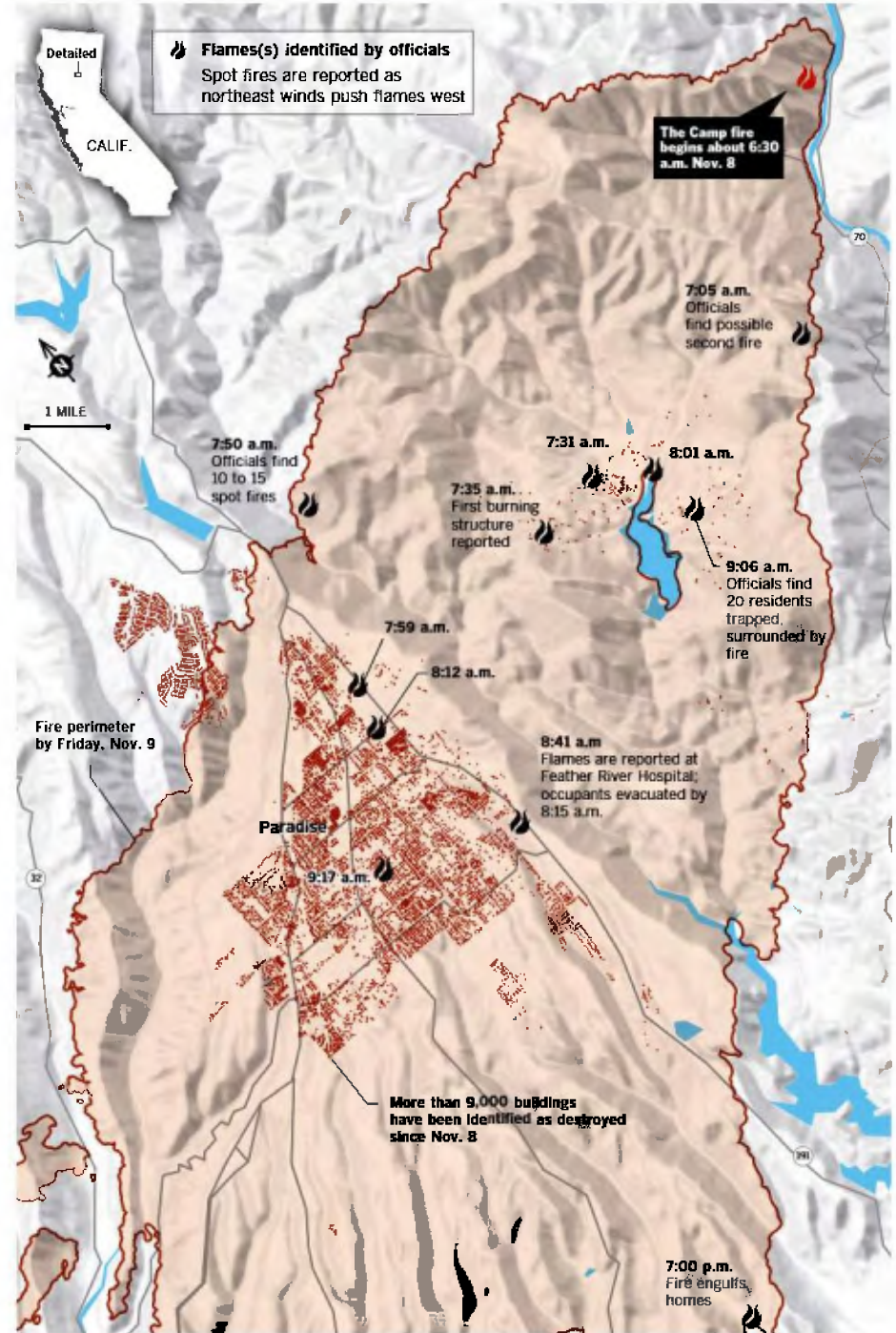
Four hours later, the fire had burned through the town, but the evacuation was still in progress.

Even if authorities had called for an immediate evacuation of Paradise the moment the fire started, there still wouldn't have been time to get all of the residents to safety before the town was engulfed in fire.

Graphic from Los Angeles Times, November 18, 2018

A step-by-step account of the destructive Camp fire

The fire exploded within a matter of hours, becoming the deadliest in California's history.



Sources: Cal Fire, Nextzen, OpenStreetMap, law-enforcement, fire and emergency radio traffic. Graphics reporting by PAIGE ST. JOHN, ARNA PHILLIPS
NORTH KARRAN LOS ANGELES TIMES

Los Angeles Times

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2018

Officials hoped to avoid a repeat of previous gridlock, but staggered evacuation moved too slowly.

BY JOSEPH SERNA,
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PARADISE, Calif.—When the Camp fire barreled toward this Sierra foothill town last Thursday morning, officials had a crucial choice to make right away: How much of Paradise should be evacuated? The decision was complicated by history and

topography. Paradise sits on a hilltop and is hemmed in by canyons, with only four narrow winding routes to flee to safety. During its last major fire in 2008, authorities evacuated so many people that roads became dangerously clogged. So this time, they decided not to immediately under-

go a full-scale evacuation, hoping to get residents out of neighborhoods closest to the fires first before the roads became grid-locked. But it soon became clear that the fire was moving too fast for that plan, and that the whole town was in jeopardy. A full-scale evacuation order was is-

sued at 9:17 a.m., but by then the fire was already consuming the town. [See Evacuation, A8]

Fire outpaced town's evacuation effort

[Evacuation, from A1]

At least 56 people were killed — most of them in their homes, some trying to flee in their cars and others outside, desperately seeking shelter from the flames. More than 10,000 structures were lost in what is by far the worst wildfire in California history.

It's unclear how much a different evacuation strategy would have changed the outcome of the fire, which was fueled by intense wind gusts of up to 52 mph and record dry vegetation in an area notoriously vulnerable to fires and wind-blown embers.

But the level of destruction and death is sure to make Paradise a grim lesson for agencies trying to improve emergency alerts and evacuations from fires as well as floods, mudslides and other natural disasters.

The death toll from natural disasters in California in



Sources: Weather.com, Cal Fire, Google

SWETHA KANNAN Los Angeles Times

the last year has been enormous, with nearly 40 killed in the wine country and Mendocino County fires and more than 20 in the Montecito mudslides. Officials acknowledged shortcomings in the efforts to get people out of harm's way.

In the chaos of the Para-

dise fire, many residents said, they never got warnings by phone from authorities to leave. Some said they got warnings from police driving through their streets using loudspeakers. Others got texts from neighbors. But few said they got official text alerts or phone calls

from the government.

The fire was first reported near the community of Pulga — about seven miles from Paradise — about 6:30 a.m. By 7:35 a.m., it had reached the nearby hamlet of Concow.

The first evacuation order for Paradise came at 8 a.m., a minute after the first flames were spotted in town. The order was limited to the eastern side of Paradise. The hope was to get the residents closest to fire out immediately, with the rest of the town to follow if needed.

But the fire was simply moving too fast.

"The fire had already outrun us," said John Messina, California Department of Fire and Forestry Protection battalion chief for Butte County.

The evacuation orders were sent using a phone system called CodeRed, which covers all landlines as well as cellphone numbers volun-

tarily submitted by residents. But the system doesn't cover all phones in the town. "In the town of Paradise, I think we'd be lucky to say 25% or 30%" of phone lines are in the system — and that's after local officials urge residents to sign up, said Jim Broshears, who directs Paradise's emergency operations center.

Also, the system can reach only so many phones per hour. "I can't give you the raw numbers, but there's a capacity per hour of calls. So CodeRed can't [make] 12,000 calls at once. It's really fast, but not this fast," Broshears said.

These types of systems have been criticized because they reach so few people. Instead, some safety experts have advocated using the federal government's Wireless Emergency Alert system, which sends Amber Alert-style warnings to cellphones within a certain geo-

graphical area. But the system was not used during several California disasters, including the wine country fires and the heavy flooding that hit San Jose.

James Gore, chairman of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, said government is failing when officials don't do a good job of communicating an incoming hazard.

"If people are already getting word on Facebook, and there's nothing coming out of your government, then you've failed," said Gore, whose county has begun to buy fire cameras that can sense the movement of blazes by heat and is seeking to purchase air sirens for parts of the county without cell coverage. "If you're more worried about the crisis you could cause than the crisis that is upon you, then you have failed."

In Paradise, Broshears [See Evacuation, A9]

Officials debate how to get warnings out in time

[**Evacuation**, from A8] said officials did not employ the Wireless Emergency Alert system because they initially wanted to stagger the evacuations by neighborhood. He also said that Amber Alert-style alerts do “not go to every phone at the same time.”

According to the Federal Communications Commission, Wireless Emergency Alerts are broadcast to coverage areas that best approximate the zone of an emergency; mobile devices in the alert zone will receive the alert. There has been criticism that the geographical targeting of the system is not terribly precise, and in late 2019, wireless carriers are supposed to improve geo-targeting of the alerts.

During the recent test of the presidential alert distributed through the Wireless Emergency Alert system, the average delay in users’ receiving a text message was about 22 seconds.

Because of its vulnerability to fire, Paradise has debated the best evacuation strategy for years.

The idea of staggering evacuations was discussed

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— JAMES GORE,
chairman, Sonoma County
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in the wake of the 2008 fire that burned dozens of homes, county documents reviewed by The Times show. After the fire, some officials felt that residents were “over-evacuated” and that that needlessly clogged roads.

But the documents also show several instances in which county emergency officials warned that they might have to quickly evacuate the entire town.

Many Paradise residents said they were baffled by the

lack of a warning.

“I assumed if something were to happen, there’d be an alert on your cellphone,” said Alexandria Wilson, 21. Neither she nor any of her 10 relatives now packed into a home in Applegate who all lost their homes in Paradise had ever heard of Butte County’s CodeRed emergency alert program.

Only two of them received warnings and those were from a police officer driving down the road telling people to evacuate.

Instead, Wilson’s 10-year-old brother, Eden, was coordinating an evacuation effort.

Savvy with a cellphone, he was texting everyone and telling them to rendezvous at a Burger King in Chico.

“Nobody should have to get a call from a 10-year-old,” said Jacob Golden, Wilson’s boyfriend.

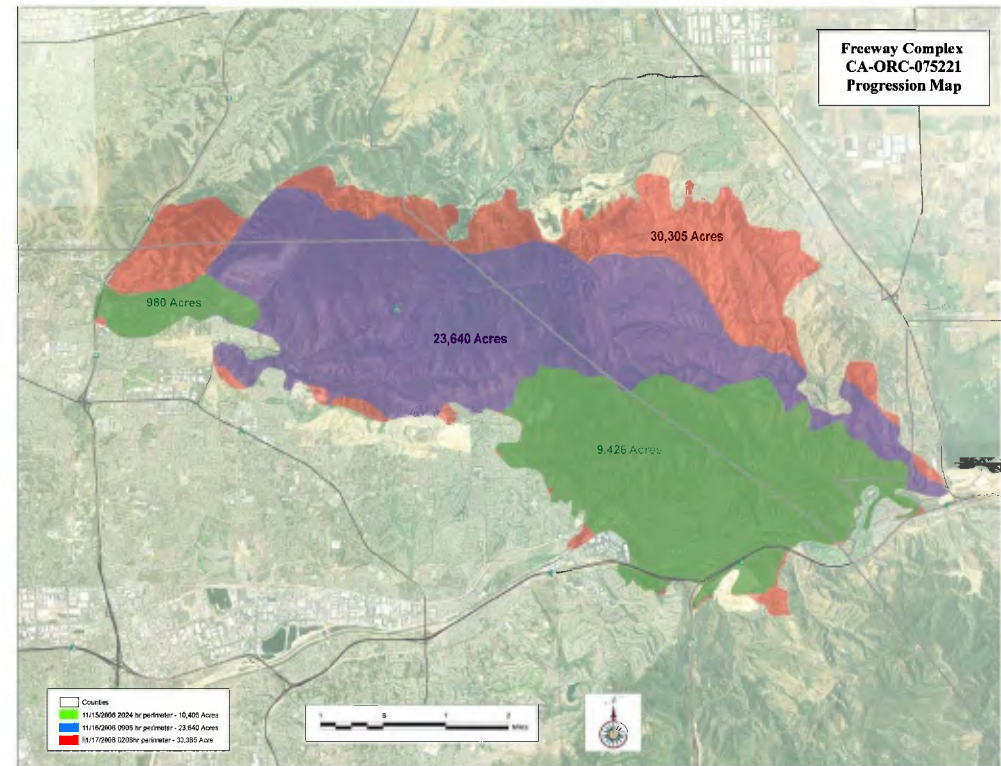
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Freeway Complex Fire map, courtesy of Hills for Everyone.