

FOR RELEASE: 2/10/25

**Re: Traffic Study Urges County to Heed Warnings:
Arnold Drive to Highway 12 could become a death trap in the next
major wildfire**

Contact:
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**Independent Traffic Study Shows Many Sonoma Valley Residents Face
Evacuation Times of 4 Hours or Longer**

Glen Ellen, CA, Feb. 10, 2025 – An evacuation of Sonoma Valley residents in the event of a wildfire could take four hours of gridlock or longer, with available roads insufficient to service evacuation demand. If the Sonoma Developmental Center is built out as currently planned, evacuation times on Arnold Drive and Route 12 will take 4.5 hours or more.

These estimates are from an independently funded professional traffic engineering study of the distribution and density of people, vehicles, and facilities in the northern Sonoma Valley. It has revealed that even during an evacuation with an hour's notice, residents should expect to spend **four hours or more** in slow traffic, and some will face slogs of **9 hours or more** in some scenarios.

“Imagine spending four or more hours mired in traffic in the midst of choking smoke and advancing flames. Remember how people burned in their cars during fires in Oakland, Paradise, and Lahaina. This could be any roadway in Sonoma Valley north of the city of Sonoma,” says Kevin Padian, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, UC Berkeley, former Fire Board member and Valley resident. “Highway 12 corridor could become a death trap in the next major wildfire.”

The Sonoma Valley study, called SAFE (Sonoma Area Fire Evacuation Study) was conducted by the internationally renowned firm, KLD Associates in San Antonio, TX who has conducted evacuation studies and planning for every nuclear power plant in the US and Canada, terrorist attack planning for Washington DC, and wildfire evacuation studies and plans for a dozen cities in the western US. This study is independent of all previous

government-commissioned Sonoma Valley studies. It is more detailed and data-based, and its \$90,000 cost was raised by members of the Valley of the Moon Alliance (VOTMA) and numerous community groups and individuals.

Among key findings are:

Our Available Roadway Supply Is Deemed “Insufficient” to Service the Evacuation Demand. An evacuation of the Valley involves 27,300 people, 25,000 evacuating vehicles, and an additional 9,000 other vehicles traversing the valley. This includes residents, tourists, workers and other visitors who may be in the Valley at the time of evacuation. The report projects that an hour after an evacuation is announced, traffic on Arnold Drive and Route 12 between Kenwood and the Sonoma City limits, normally 45 mph, will slow to 1-2 mph for another 2-3 hours, seldom approaching 5 mph. New projected developments of thousands of residences at the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC), Hanna Center, and the Springs Area would significantly slow evacuation further adding another hour of 1-2 mph travel time.

Contradicts previous study by the County’s Permit Sonoma -- The results provide a more accurate picture of the hazards faced during an emergency evacuation than previous studies. For example, the County agency Permit Sonoma commissioned a traffic study in connection with the proposed development of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) into a site with 960-1200 residences, a 160-room hotel, a conference center, and other facilities. The EIR produced by the County consultants projected that the SDC development would add only 90 seconds to the evacuation time out of Eldridge. The EIR concluded that there was no need to alter any emergency evacuation plans, despite effectively doubling the population and vehicle load.

In ruling in favor of a lawsuit filed by citizens against the County’s SDC plans for its inadequate EIR, County Judge Bradford Demeo excoriated the County’s purported mitigation measures, goals, and policies as “toothless, vague, and limited to hopeful intentions ... with no definition of what any of this means.”

In contrast, the new SAFE study is based on **actual measurements** of road segments, including lane widths, shoulder widths (when present), surface

conditions, truck traffic, and traffic signals; survey responses on anticipated evacuation behavior by almost 600 households up and down the Valley; data on actual and estimated use of roads by schoolchildren and parents, commuters, winery employees, and tourists collected by VOTMA, as well as publicly available information. These were integrated into a series of proprietary KLD models explained in the report, and the findings and methods now available to the public.

Bean Anderson, Ph.D., a local retired engineer involved with the study, notes, “The **average** time across these various scenarios is **roughly four hours to evacuate**, but individual projections for zones range from **three to eight hours assuming** that there are no blocked roads, no accidents, no obstruction of view from smoke, and no hazardous vehicles slowing traffic. Actual times could be longer or much longer, depending on these and other factors. “

Anderson adds: “The SAFE Report reveals just how unsafe our roads are during emergency evacuations. There hasn't been significant growth in road capacity for the past 100 years but the population has increased 10-fold.”

VOTMA is presenting this study to the public and County officials, so that the County can apply a reality-based evacuation analysis approach to development planning decisions, in order to avoid the catastrophic tragedies experienced in other major wildfires.

A community information meeting will be held February 24, 2025 at 6:30 PM at Altimira Middle School, 17805 Arnold Drive, Sonoma.

The complete SAFE Report is now available to the public at <https://votma.org/evac-study>.

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