

The Newsletter of the



December 2020

President's Message

I'm so ready for this year to be done! I could gripe about the myriad challenges we've had to deal with, but the Editor wants us to concentrate on the happy things of Fitch Mountain living, so I'll start with those:

- I'm thankful that right when two Trustees and our Secretary decided not to run again, we had new people looking to get involved.
- It's nice that more people seem to be out walking—on the road, on the trails, in the preserve. Everyone smiles; you can see it in their eyes, even if you can't see their teeth.
- I'm thankful that more people are taking responsibility to clear brush and flammable debris from their property. For the Chipper Days in June, 56 households put piles out for clearing. In addition to chipping a ton of stuff, we packed two 30' debris boxes the size of my first apartment. All of it was fire fuel.
- I'm thankful that with HUGE support from Healdsburg Fire and Fire Safe Sonoma, we got a grant to clear along the main road, and 25 property owners agreed to have extra clearing done on their properties. Many owners of unimproved (i.e., vacant) parcels gave us permission to clear up to 30 feet onto their property, which made a huge difference. That and another project to clear protective perimeters around our three large redwood water tanks were complete by the end of October.

And since our last NL in June, there have been other developments worthy of mention:

Covid-19 continued to give us opportunities to demonstrate that it's all about neighbor helping neighbor. We heard of many folks regularly checking in on their neighbors, shopping for each other, sewing masks, formulating hand sanitizer for their friends, and sharing hard-to-find household items.

We seem to be shifting from an emphasis on fighting fire, to learning to live with it. Terms like "defensible space," "home hardening," and "prescribed burning" are becoming part of our vocabulary. Our COPE organization, made up of 18 neighborhood leaders, hosted several webinars on these topics and arranged for voluntary home inspections this past year. These and other efforts will continue. More people are taking it upon themselves to address potentially dangerous build-up of fire fuels. The FMA and COPE will continue to do what we can, but it ultimately comes down to property owners making this mountain safer. A long-term fire risk abatement plan is in the works with Healdsburg Fire along with CalFire and the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District (NSCFPD). Eerily, the Fuels Reduction Crew from NSCF and the County chipper crew were working along our road as the Walbridge Fire burned to our west. Another bullet dodged. Within the next year, Fitch Mountaineers should be asked if we want to become part of the NSCFPD. The FMA will continue to keep you informed about this decision process. It's important.

The election of officers and trustees took place in June via email for the first time ever. (Bios of the "newbies" who were elected are on page 3.) By July, FMA membership had grown from about 120 to nearly 200 members, and over 50 of them logged into our virtual Annual Meeting. We missed the customary array of great picnic food and the chance to converse personally with folks from all over the mountain, but the meeting was successful in conducting business and honoring Volunteer of the Year Chuck Eaton, and also Al Pucci, who retired after more than 20 years of service as a Trustee.

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President's Message con't:

In October the FMA Trustees and Officers held a virtual “retreat” to analyze the current state of the organization, where they’d like to see it go, and how to get there. Key take-aways were:

- The need to better know the growing membership; meaning knowing who our members are, where you live, how much you’re on the mountain, what you care about, how you want to be communicated with, and why you’re members in the first place.
- The need to better communicate with the membership. We rely on email almost exclusively, and maybe we’re not using the best tools.
- The need to update the FMA website so it’s more up-to-date, functional, and informative.

We’ll be keeping you apprised of progress in these areas, and more, over the coming months.

The months of September and October were spent indoors due to pandemics, fires, red flag warnings, and bad air quality. Better to just forget those months (sorry if you had a birthday or something). A positive glimmer in October was the announcement by the State Water Board that they are postponing their decision on whether to declare the Russian River “impaired” (i.e., polluted), due to the lack of evidence. This means that broad-brush tightening of septic regulations will not be imposed, at least for another year or so. We will keep you posted on next moves. Then November came and the sunny part of the day shrunk, we fell back, and temps finally dropped along with most of the leaves—but not until after a spectacular display of color. We’ve only gotten a sprinkle so far,* so do whatever dance, incantation, or whispered plea you usually perform when you want it to rain. But, please, request that it be spread out so nothing floods. It’s been a tough year. We’ve had enough!

—Pat Abercrombie

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*Editor’s note: Pat wrote this on December 3rd.

Thinking about Fun Night

Remember social gatherings? Where people you don’t live with actually get together in the same room? Our January 2020 Fun Night gathering was great fun and calories were in abundance. Ken Hite won the “Best Pasta Sauce” contest, and we played an epic game of Fitch Mountain Bingo. Unfortunately, we won’t be getting together — at least not in the same room anyway — for Fun Night a month from now.

But, not to be deterred, our Fun and Appreciation Committee is brainstorming about a virtual Fun Night on Saturday January 30th via Zoom. We’re still working out details like whether people yell into their computer mic when they get a bingo or they raise their hand virtually. We’re looking at gift cards for prizes. Details to come when we get it figured out. In the meantime, put January 30th on your calendar!



We Welcome Our Elected “Newbies”

Three new trustees were elected in July. They join incumbent Donita Proctor.



Rhonda Bellmer has lived full time on the Mountain since 2011. She recently passed her role of COPE Neighborhood Captain on to a neighbor in order to concentrate on Trustee matters, including being our liaison with Healdsburg’s Open Space Committee, keeping us informed about activities related to the Fitch Mountain Open Space Preserve. Rhonda is also working on signage for fire safety at the approaches to Fitch Mountain, and neighborhood safety at the river access point on Redwood Drive. Her background is in nonprofit and public education, and she has taken up painting.



Cathy Hodgson lives full time near Del Rio Woods Park. She co-chairs the Del Rio Woods Committee, which liaises with Sonoma County Regional Parks in the ongoing improvements at the park as well as park operation and maintenance. Her husband Tom leads a cadre of neighbors who unlock the gates to open the park every day. She’s said of the Mountain community, “I feel I’m at camp every day.”



Heather Pilatic lives much of the time on Riverview Drive. She is leading the charge on FMA communications capacity-building and community engagement and is concurrently focused on getting the unpaved portion of Riverview Drive graded and rocked in a private-public partnership with Sonoma County Transportation Public Works and some *very* patient neighbors. She brings to FMA her professional background in nonprofit organizational development, strategic planning, and communications. She also really loves dogs.

We also have a new Secretary:



Dana McKnight has lived on South Fitch Mountain Court since 2019. In addition to working with the FMA treasurer to keep track of membership and taking meeting minutes in her role as Secretary, she also serves on our Water District Advisory Committee. She has experience in both the public and nonprofit sectors, such as the County’s Fire Service Working Group and Corazón Healdsburg, and she brings a wealth of organizational development, strategic planning, and group facilitation skills to the table.

There's Much to Be Grateful for on Our Mountain!

I am grateful for such a lovely place in which to shelter in place through this pandemic!

—Donita Proctor

I've lived in my house at the end of Hilltop next to the Preserve for 40 years. I love the mountain for so many reasons, but the one closest to my heart is the birds. It is amazing the diversity of birds that live and migrate here. I am a photographer and have a feeder right outside my kitchen window. I especially love watching the baby birds become adults over the spring season.

—Diana Stratton

I am thankful for the beautiful fog that rises off the river when the sun comes up, and for being able to share that beauty with my lovely daughter and husband.

—Emma Kudritzki Hall



From left to right: Northern Flicker; two Juncos; Stellar Jay nest in my greenhouse; Black-headed Grosbeak



I am grateful for my neighbors' quirky, cranky realness. And I am held intact by the mountain's quiet natural abundance. Madrones are my favorite, but the squirrels make me laugh.

—Heather Pilatic

The beautiful fall colors, sunlight, the illumination....

—Marty Silge

I feel very fortunate to be sequestered with someone I love in this place we both love.

—Ellen Silge

I am thankful to live in such a beautiful place filled with amazing wildlife. How lucky I am to see this in my backyard!

—Dana McKnight



Walking along lower Fitch Mtn. Rd. and the Riverview Trail has been my COVID salvation. The Fall color, especially the Big Leaf Maples, has brightened my world, and inspired many paintings.

—Rhonda Bellmer

Gratitude on Redwood Drive

I'm grateful to live in a real neighborhood, where people know and talk with each other—interesting people, everyone is friendly. I'm grateful for the increase in the five-and-under population on Redwood Drive. Suddenly we have little kids exuberant with joy, running, laughing, riding bikes, finding bugs, and chasing each other around. It reminds me to notice and appreciate the small beauties we are surrounded by. I'm grateful for the quiet that has descended on the neighborhood now that the summer crowds have moved on. I'm very grateful for those who work really hard on our behalf, especially Pat and Priscilla Abercrombie, but also the FMA board members who have looked out for our interests for years, all the COPE people who are working to make us safer, and all the volunteers who have worked on the mountain. I'm grateful to live in Northern California where I can be considered a harmless eccentric rather than a dangerous lunatic. I'm grateful to have a good electrician living down the street. I'm grateful to hear the sounds of home improvement going on up and down the street, as yet another river “cabin” becomes a real house. I'm grateful to live right on this beautiful river. I'm grateful for the sun when I walk to the other side of the mountain. I'm even grateful for our neighbors' silly dog, Willow, who is a sweetie. I'm especially grateful to have a sweetheart to share the joys and burdens and make life more wonderful.

—Eldon McFarland

The View from One Window

My gratitudes begin in the silver lining category: I have a job that allows me to work at home in a dedicated office overlooking the Russian River, which, in our curve of the river, flows from west to east. I am so grateful for this river view, which over the thirty years Brian and I have lived here has brought incalculable moments of awe.

I feel gratitude for the view just from this office window. I can watch happy and curious visitors: families who have summered here for years, and kids from the big cities who rarely step foot in a river; folk in kayaks and canoes and on paddle boards and rafts; dogs and kids paddling around; lovers believing that they are alone despite the crowd.

I am also grateful for late autumn when the people stop visiting and the beach is empty except for the rocks and plants and Brian's labyrinth.

I have yet to mention the rest of the natural world I am privileged to see from this one window... egrets and great blue herons; osprey and mallards and hummingbirds; often lots of squirrels and blue jays, not so often raccoons and deer. There was a time when we saw river otters regularly, and I am grateful for having had that opportunity. Giving hope for a positive change is the sighting of river otters this summer from the Redwood Drive beach. In the same vein, I am grateful to have seen quail two decades ago, when they'd fly onto our deck to visit our bird feeder. I would be grateful were they to return someday.

With the river as my backyard I am blessed with a view of the sky that is unblocked, except for distant mountains. From my office window, the view of the hills, the trees, the sky, and the ever-changing clouds brings a sense of peace and ever more gratitude.

I am happy for this opportunity to express a different kind of gratitude when I consider another window — that of my computer screen. Thank you, Pat Abercrombie, FMA president, for keeping us all in the know during whatever crisis we are dealing with. You have informed us well during fires and floods and Covid, oh my! I know I speak for many who share in this expression of gratitude. ¡Muchas Gracias!

—Kitty Wells