

A Calif. beach town's biggest split: Whether to adopt street addresses

Since 1916, Carmel-by-the-Sea's buildings have never been numbered. A plan to change that has the community divided.

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When Susan Bjerre moved to Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif., in 2017, she discovered that her new home didn't come with an address.

There's a street name, but no number to identify her house.

Seven years later, the inconveniences have racked up: Waving delivery drivers down on the street, spending hours on the phone with utility companies, dealing with confusion while managing bank accounts.

"It's just endless," Bjerre, 72, said. "It is just so inconvenient."

The moneyed California town of 3,200 is nestled against the Pacific Ocean, about 120 miles south of San Francisco by road. Its residents refer to it as a village, replete with fairytale-like cottages, a sparkling seaside and tall, spindly trees. Since its [founding in 1916](#), the town has never had street addresses. Instead, residents use cross streets and other descriptors to help others find their homes. They gather at the local post office — the only building in town with an address — to pick up mail and chat. Many name their homes in lieu of having a formal address, with signs posted above front doors or in yards declaring titles like "The Tree House" or "Sea Urchin."

But after hours of debate that pitted tradition against modernity, the [city council last month narrowly voted by 3-2](#) to move forward with street address implementation. The city staff will return in September with a plan that explores what street addresses in Carmel-by-the-Sea would look like.

The village is divided. For some the tradition is increasingly implausible in today's technology-reliant era and raises public safety concerns, residents told The Washington Post. For others, it is part of the town's unique charm and something to be preserved.

Jeff Baron, who is running for mayor, was among the three council members who voted in favor. “I had a hard time getting a Real ID because I couldn’t prove where I lived,” he laughed. When the covid-19 pandemic struck, upgrading his internet services to accommodate frequent Zoom meetings also proved cumbersome: He showed the internet provider a map of where he lived, “And I never heard from him.”

Dave Potter, who has been mayor for six years and is running for a third term, thinks addresses are unnecessary. “Carmel is only about 1.1 square mile. Everybody knows where everybody lives,” he said. “We’ve been like this for a hundred years.” (Potter told *The Post* that he’s faced no inconveniences living without an address.)

Both Potter and Baron emphasized that the plan for street addresses is still being developed. The election in November could also shift the makeup of the city’s leadership, offering a path for opponents to reverse the city council’s plan. In the meantime, there will be room for residents to continue voicing their opinions, Potter and Baron said.

Nancy Twomey, 69, does not want her home numbered. She’s lived in Carmel for eight years after regularly vacationing in the seaside town for about three decades. “I’m pro-status quo,” she said. “It’s part of the Carmel experience.”

The lack of addresses provides an “investigatory” experience, she said. “It creates a situation where people can explore, and discover alleyways, courtyards.”

Twomey acknowledged that it can create “hiccups” — she recently had trouble when a bank required proof of residence. “But we work through it and move on. There are ways to overcome any inconveniences,” she said. “It took just a little extra effort to get that to happen.”

Twomey said she’s open to refinement of the current system: perhaps a more standardized way to describe where people live, or a requirement that all homes have signage out front. “Yes, it’s quirky and yes, it’s inconvenient at times,” she said. “But it is one of the handful of things that makes Carmel special.”

Many in favor of street addresses point to safety concerns that they say take precedence over a desire for charm. Carmel is not in compliance with California Fire Code, which requires addresses for all buildings. “We should enforce the fire code and we should enforce the building code,” Andrew Miller, chief of the Monterey Fire Department, which serves Carmel, said during last month’s heated city council meeting. “Are the response times in Carmel exceptional? Yes, they are exceptional today. Could they be better? They could be a little bit better.”

Though some local and county emergency responders may be familiar with the town’s descriptors for buildings, other agencies — like CAL Fire, the state agency often at the helm of battling large wildfires — are not, which poses the possibility of delays, according to Carmel’s director of public safety and police chief Paul Tomasi. (Monterey Fire Department has said that the lack of addresses has not been a reason for a delayed response in Carmel. The local police department said that it does not have data on this.)

Tom Parks, who has lived in Carmel for 35 years, said the safety concerns are overblown and scoffed at the idea of instituting street addresses. If Carmel gets addresses, then home mail delivery will probably be next, he said.

“It will be the end of our small post office here, where we go to meet, to talk, to gossip, to lead a social life,” Parks, 90, said. “We go to pick up our mail, of course, but it’s a place for social gathering also. It’s in our DNA.”

The city has said that instituting street addresses will not automatically trigger mail delivery, and will not require the closure of the town’s beloved post office. Still, Parks isn’t convinced.

“We have traditions we want to hold onto, which makes this community, this little village, very, very special,” he said. “If people want to move here and want to live here, I presume people want to live here because they find it special,” and that means honoring and maintaining the town’s customs.

But for Bjerre, Carmel-by-the-Sea’s charm is in its trees, ocean, architecture and people. These are the charming details that lured her to permanently move to the town after vacationing there for 25 years. “Lack of street addresses was not a factor,” she laughed.

She’s hopeful that her days without an address are numbered.