

# San Francisco Chronicle

## ‘13th house on the right’: Should this affluent California town finally get street addresses?

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Oct 19, 2024

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Carmel-by-the-Sea homes display names such as “Porter” and “Beach Cottage” in lieu of street addresses. Some traditionalists fear the town will lose its charm if residents vote to change to numbered addresses in November

2025. City Council Member Jeff Baron, center, views the matter as a safety issue.

CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA — Jeff Baron was walking his dog through a residential area of this [moneyed beach town](#) last month when the mayoral candidate paused to admire the view.

Butterflies perched on a moss-covered pedestrian bridge. Birds chirped in towering oak trees. Decorating the nearby Swiss Alpine chalets and storybook English cottages were, instead of numbered addresses, identifying names such as “Sunburst,” “The Gazebo” and “Foggy Bottom.”

“The beach here is spectacular,” Baron said, “but neighborhoods like this are what’s really magical about this place.”

Many residents worry that Carmel could soon lose some of its signature quaintness. In the century-plus since poets, painters and writers flocked here from the Bay Area in the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake,

the village on the Monterey Peninsula has prided itself on its nonconformity. Now, some say, Carmel could tip toward becoming Anywhere, USA.

At least, that's what traditionalists fear will happen if the town, as soon as next year, votes in favor of establishing its first numbered addresses.

Not everyone dreads such a move toward modernity. Baron, 60, is among those who view the matter as an important safety issue. Their argument is simple: With no street lamps or conventional address system, Carmel's aging population — more than half of its roughly 3,200 residents are older than 65 — could be at risk of not receiving emergency services in a timely manner, particularly at night.



Carmel is poised to add street addresses to buildings for the first time in its 108-year history.

Though adding house numbers has long been a source of debate among locals, the rise of Amazon and an increased reliance on package deliveries made it a hotter topic in recent years. The City Council has held more than a half-dozen heated meetings to address the address issue, finding little resolution.

In mid-July, the council voted 3-2 in favor of continuing to explore options. By mid-September, though, the public outcry against adding addresses was intense enough for the current mayor, Dave Potter, to file a motion to put the issue to voters — either as an advisory vote or as a measure — in November 2025, which the council narrowly passed.

In the far more immediate term, locals are closely following next month's town elections, where candidates' position on the address issue will be key. The mayoral seat and two council seats are up for grabs.

Baron, a former software engineer in his sixth year on council, has joined political newcomer Dale Byrne in challenging Potter for a position [that actor Clint Eastwood held in the late 1980s](#). The only mayoral candidate who is pro-street addresses, Baron said his focus if elected wouldn't just be on finally making the transition. Escalating tensions have divided this picturesque, 1-square-mile community.

“One of the things that has happened because of the street-addresses debate is that things have gotten so polarized that people have lost their sort of sense of empathy with others,” Baron said. “People are entitled to feelings without being told that your feelings are irrelevant, or your feelings don't matter.”



Instead of numbered addresses, identifying names mark homes in Carmel, which is set to vote on adding street addresses to buildings next year.

Outsiders might dismiss Carmel's anti-address constituents as wealthy complainers with too much time. But to many of the people who pay big money to live here, the debate represents something larger.

In addition to having no house numbers, Carmel has no parking meters, no fast-food restaurants, no sidewalks in residential areas, no traffic lights and no mailboxes. The post office — the only building in town with an official address — is a cherished social hub that many locals visit daily to pick up their mail, catch up with friends and absorb a sense of place.

Non-U.S. mail services — such as FedEx, UPS and Amazon — use home delivery. To help ensure their packages get where they need to go, many Carmel residents have befriended their delivery drivers.

Rumors have circulated that the arrival of street addresses would force the closure of the post office, a claim the postmaster has rejected. More broadly, some are concerned that implementing street addresses could put Carmel on a grim trajectory.

“OK, you add addresses, then what?” one longtime resident said. “Are you going to put in a McDonald’s?”

The prevailing sentiment from such folks is that Carmel must respect that people came here to escape the big city and enjoy a slower lifestyle. Potter, who has been mayor since 2018, often asks address advocates: “You moved here because you liked it, right? Why change it?”



Karyl Hall, co-chair of the Carmel Preservation Association, is against the town using street addresses on its buildings, saying, “It’s all about stomping out our traditions to be with the times.”

Kodiak Greenwood/Special to the Chronicle

At the local farmers’ market on Thursdays, Karyl Hall and Neal Kruse, co-chairs of the Carmel Preservation Association, run a booth with signs imploring passersby to “Save Carmel’s charm.”

Adding street addresses is “really no different than when people want to add parking meters or replace our wonderful architecture with more modern designs,” Hall said. “It’s all about stomping out our traditions to be with the times. And, sure, there are some things about living here that might be inconvenient. But those things are also what make us unique.”

Still, in interviews with the Chronicle, several residents voiced frustrations about the consequences of going address-less. Newcomers sometimes struggle to get cable TV, car insurance and Real IDs because they can’t prove where they live. Often, at night, neighbors arrive on each other’s doorsteps with smartphone flashlights to search for missing Amazon parcels.

What are typically minor annoyances can sometimes become more serious. During the council’s July 9 meeting on the address issue, one resident, speaking over Zoom, called it a “life-and-death situation in my life and my family.”

Her wife’s medication, she said, requires refrigeration and must be destroyed if it’s not delivered on time. In that scenario, the wife could become gravely ill unless she visited an infusion center — immediately.

Susan Bjerre can relate. When her husband left a local hospital 2½ years ago after recovering from pneumonia, he needed special equipment to maintain a healthy oxygen level. The problem was that the delivery driver couldn’t

figure out where they lived. When the equipment finally arrived 1½ days late, the husband’s oxygen readings were frighteningly low.

“When I saw the potential impact on my husband’s health, the address thing just took on a whole new level of importance for me,” said Bjerre, who plans to vote for Baron in the Nov. 5 election. “I don’t want to start bad-mouthing people who are against street addresses, but it just doesn’t make a lot of sense to me.”

The City Council tapped Emily Garay, Carmel’s administrative analyst, to research the costs and benefits of adding street addresses. During a presentation at the July 9 council meeting, she stressed that the implementation of addresses would not shutter the post office. She and others also provided more insight into the question of emergency response.

When a Carmel resident calls for an ambulance or fire truck, dispatchers 27 miles northeast in Salinas must decipher the location of the emergency by asking the caller for a description and looking at a city map. Baron said official response times for ambulances and fire trucks, which are generally good, don’t account for those precious seconds.



Carmel City Council Member Karen Ferlito supports the implementation of street addresses on homes.

Karen Ferlito, the council’s most ardent supporter of implementing street addresses, added that official response times end the moment emergency responders arrive at a house — even if it’s the wrong house.

“When someone suffers a serious stroke or heart attack,” Ferlito said, “every second counts.”

Moreover, Carmel isn’t abiding by state fire code, which requires buildings to be numbered.

Yet in an enclave as secluded and affluent as Carmel, such realities are sometimes no match for hallowed traditions, which helps explain why an old law is still on the books — albeit unenforced — requiring a permit for heels taller than 2 inches.

It also explains why, after the council voted on July 9, to proceed with implementing addresses, some residents accused the governing body of violating the Brown Act, which mandates public access to government meetings.

At an Aug. 6 meeting, City Attorney Brian Pierik ruled that no such violation had occurred. Five weeks later, after listening to yet another lengthy back-and-forth between anti- and pro-address residents at a council meeting, Baron appeared visibly exasperated.

“We’ve been at this for 2½ years, and we’ve had nine city meetings,” he said. “It feels like it’s delay, delay, delay.”

Baron proposed that the council write an initiative repealing the no-address ordinance, receive more input from the community and — hopefully — reach a final decision from voters in the spring. After Baron’s motion failed 3-2, Potter successfully moved to push the issue to voters next November.

Two weeks later, on a sunny Monday morning in late September, Baron was walking his 9-year-old wirehaired pointing griffon, Worf, when he wondered aloud whether the address question would ever fully be resolved. After all, this issue is so ingrained in Carmel’s history that, 71 years ago, the town threatened to secede from California over proposed state legislation requiring house numbers.

Like many other transplants, Baron hadn’t known that Carmel was address-less until he went house hunting there. In 2005, after his partner’s Silicon Valley company went public, he realized his longtime goal of buying property in the area.

Three years later, to avoid confusion for the couple’s wedding guests, Baron created a detailed pdf file with directions to their home. The document featured an illustrated map of Carmel and instructions that described the house’s location relative to landmarks and cross streets, ending with, “13th house on the right.”

Those same directions did not prevent a reporter from getting lost on the way to this story.

“The decision to change traditions, especially traditions in a small town like this one, are difficult and wrenching,” Baron said. “I’m not ignorant to what all of that means.”

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