

# How to stop pathway burglars

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*One of the most common complaints made at public hearings on proposed offroad paths is that they provide a way for burglars to access homes. A number of other such issues also frequently come up but the answer to this security question turns out to be rather simple. The goal of this note is to reduce the time spent discussing irrelevant issues at public hearings though it may have the effect of increasing other kinds of arguments.*

## Why paths are needed

The existing pathway system in Los Altos Hills seems to be well suited to the needs of the Town, given that there are many cul-de-sacs and few through roads. Most people seem to agree but there are some who strongly object. Where I live, a “walk around the block” involves a 5.5 mile hike but a half-mile walk along roadside and off-road paths takes me to a neighborhood that is about three miles away by road.

For many years I enjoyed commuting by bicycle to my Stanford research lab, partly by offroad path. At certain times of the year I could pause on the way home to sample some delicious trailside blackberries. A good life!

In public hearings on proposed paths it appears to me that many of the anti-path arguments are based on thinly veiled economic or ethnic bigotry. However I must admit that I too indulge in bigotry in that I often use derogatory terms for people whose views I oppose. I’m talking about NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard), who object to paths on pseudo-security grounds, claiming that they go through people’s back yards when in fact they don’t. Town paths go along boundaries between properties and can be fenced off or visually hidden by hedges.

Some others I call “Snooties.” These are people who object to paths that might bring lower class people into their beautiful neighborhood.

Some other people apparently think that cyclists should stay off “their” roads – I call them “Bicycle Bigots.” There are lots living in our town and they are encouraged both by media distortions and by Town staff who, on more than one occasion, have posted signs on certain roads prohibiting bikes from going there, even though that is contrary to California Law.

When the Town was incorporated in 1956 there was general recognition that the pathway system was an essential part of the local environment but there has been increasing opposition to expansion of the pathway system in conjunction with the increasing gentrification of our Town. In the late 1990s some resident politicians discovered that pathway development was a divisive issue and used it as a campaign tool to stir people up. By the beginning of the new millennium they had control of the Council and began removing members of the Pathways Committee who actually supported paths, replacing

them with what I call “Antipathetics,” even though one of the key responsibilities of that Committee according to the Council’s charter resolution was and is “to work for the preservation and enhancement of the pathways within the Town for the use and enjoyment of all residents.”

The Antipathetics alleged that paths “threaten the safety of your family and your pets” whereas paths actually enhance safety in at least two ways.

1. Former County Sheriff Bob Wilson (who earlier provided police services in Los Altos Hills) stated that paths are a deterrent to crime inasmuch as they provide additional viewpoints from which suspicious activities can be seen by neighbors walking through.
2. Off-road paths provide emergency escape routes if road access is blocked by fire, flood or fallen objects from an earthquake.

Happily, Los Altos Hills has the lowest crime rate of all cities in Santa Clara County except Monte Sereno and our County is one of the safest in the U.S.

The Antipathetics eventually staged a coup, taking over the leadership positions of the Pathways Committee, who then developed a new Master Path Plan that called for abandoning a number of paths, though they publicly claimed that was not the case. That Plan was then approved by the Council.

However in 2002 a group of Town residents got a referendum passed at great expense that put this revised Master Path Plan on hold. The Town as a whole then voted out the entire coalition of Antipathetics and the new Council cancelled the revised Master Path Plan. The operation of the Council and Town Government has been much more efficient ever since.

Both NIMBYs and Snooties still often show up at pathway hearings expressing their territorial and isolationist views and they often raise the argument that paths provide an access route for burglars. But is that a real threat? They never quote credible statistics supporting their position because there aren’t any, but they often make up stories.

If you were a burglar how would you approach a given house? Would you walk in a quarter- to a half-mile on a path, then gather loot, then carry it back the same way? Or would you put your vehicle on the road nearby so that you could make a quick getaway? Somehow real burglars figure out the right tactic.

In all honesty I should mention that I once read about an alleged pathway burglar in the local paper about 40 years ago. I suspect that account was also a fabrication but it made a good headline.

There is, of course, a way to prevent burglaries, which is by closing the roads, but that seems a bit impractical. So the answer to the title question, “How to stop pathway burglars” is “Ignore them because they don’t exist.” Furthermore if you encounter someone who claims they do exist, you would be well advised to discount any other arguments they present because they are fabricators. They also are likely to be somewhat bigoted. But aren’t we all!