

# Suspected arson fires the subject of Monday town hall in San Pedro



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Charred area at the White Point Nature Preserve in San Pedro. (Courtesy photo)

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A series of suspected arson fires have been reported along the San Pedro coastline in the past month, prompting a town hall meeting that will be held at 6:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 6, at the Grand Annex, 434 W. Sixth St.

Dedicated in 2000, the 102-acre [White Point Nature Preserve](#) at 1600 W. Paseo del Mar in San Pedro has been hit with several suspicious fires, and the destruction of the park restrooms since mid-December.

Melissa Wayne, a nearby resident who regularly walks in the preserve, spotted smoke for the first time on Dec. 3.

“I walk through the preserve most mornings with our dog and it was probably 8 or 9 in the morning (when) I saw smoke,” she said. Two men with a fire extinguisher appeared and put it out, she said.

But it wouldn't be the first time she'd spot smoke and what became numerous burned patches of earth in the preserve, some of them large.

She and her husband, Michael Herzmark, have been active in contacting officials and letting neighbors know about the issue and the upcoming town hall. Herzmark said among the main concerns are the need for more security, enforcement for illegal activity including motorcycles, and a better 911 system, adding there are long waits before someone answers.

And in what may be a related or separate incident, the [San Pedro holiday tree](#) was apparently set on fire late Christmas night, Dec. 25. An investigation is ongoing. The tree was removed the following day but some charred evidence of the incident remains on the town square in front of the Los Angeles Maritime Museum, said Los Angeles City Councilmember Tim McOsker.

Another fire was put out near where the old Utro's Cafe was on the waterfront, he said.

“That's an alarming number of fires,” McOsker said of the overall activity, commending neighbors who have been alert to report much of the activity. “There's a lot of attention and eyes on it.”

Add to that ongoing issues with attempted break-ins at the preserve's Nature Education Center, habitat destruction and burned vegetation, and vandalism.

“We have all the dry brush (on the hillside) and it's surrounded on three sides by homes,” McOsker said of the preserve overlooking the ocean on the southern border of San Pedro.

Patrols will be scanning the area over the weekend, he said, from all sides — and cameras normally used to track wildlife at the preserve have been repositioned to better get views of unlawful activities.

Cameras along the waterfront are being reviewed for any suspicious activity around the fires there, the council member said.

Monday's town hall meeting will be held to discuss the issues and calls for increased law enforcement patrols and stricter regulations.

Speakers will include representatives from the Los Angeles Police and Fire departments and the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy.

McOsker anticipates — and hopes for — a big crowd at the town hall gathering in San Pedro's downtown area.

“In mid-December we began hearing about fires so we spoke to the Los Angeles Fire Department and asked them to look into it, to see if it was potentially arson,” McOsker said.

Meanwhile, members of the Palos Verdes Land Conservancy, he said, also found evidence fires outside the preserve boundaries.

The council member said graffiti is also an issue at the preserve.

“We will just stay on this to see if there are any patterns,” McOsker said, stressing that investigations are ongoing.

Those who spot problems are asked to call the enforcement agency responsible.

Wayne, who has supported the conservancy and volunteered also at the preserve through the years, said she's concerned about a fire spreading rapidly with the brush on the hillside and homes and elementary schools not far away.

The preserve, she said, is “a fabulous place” that attracts diverse people who get to know each other and provides a home for wildlife. “Just the other day I saw an owl in daylight. What I hate personally is realizing I'm (now) looking around wondering what the best escape route would be if a fire were to break out. It's changed the experience.”

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