

What is the Private Streets Initiative about?

In a nutshell, the Private Streets Initiative:

- discourages narrow, private streets in new residential developments to avoid the problems of overflow parking and excess traffic spilling out into and negatively impacting adjoining neighborhoods;
- encourages new developments to mesh better with existing neighborhoods;
- maintains customary buildable lot sizes by eliminating private streets from the calculations for floor area;
- enhances the health, safety and welfare of all City residents, reduces unexpected narrow street repair cost risk to the City, and treats all sections of the City the same; and
- eases potential parking and traffic problems at 488 Charleston, 801 Alma, Edgewood Plaza and other developments in various stages of planning and construction such as Alma Plaza.

Questions and Answers

1) What problems will this initiative solve?

Experience has taught us that narrow streets with inadequate parking have caused overflow traffic and inappropriate parking on adjacent streets in existing neighborhoods, significantly and adversely impacting the safety and quality of life of those adjacent areas. The narrow streets are of minimal width for fire engines, safety vehicles and garbage trucks, making it more difficult and more expensive to deliver health and safety services. Improperly parked vehicles on narrow streets endanger public safety during emergencies by impeding the access and flow of fire trucks and emergency vehicles.

2) How have residents of new neighborhoods been affected by narrow streets?

Lack of adequate street width has resulted in residents parking in what are supposed to be guest parking stalls, defeating the intent of having dedicated guest parking. This forces actual guests to inappropriately park on-street in adjacent neighborhoods. As a result, impacted neighborhoods are asking that future new developments be cut off from existing neighborhoods to reduce spillover parking. For example, new housing at the rear of the Elks Club will not have a bike and walking path from Wilkie Way to El Camino Real so as to discourage overflow parking on Wilkie Way. These understandable, preventative, neighborhood actions discourage new residents from interacting with established neighborhoods, and makes new developments become separate enclaves not truly integrated into the existing community.

3) How have developers benefited from narrow streets?

Public streets are specifically excluded from being counted in lot size for the purpose of calculating Floor Area Ratio (FAR). However, several recent developments have included private streets in the calculation of FAR. The net effect of this inclusion is to allow homes which are being built on under-sized lots to be about 10% bigger than homes would be on standard-sized lots. This impacts schools, traffic and the cost of providing City services. It also results in yet another bonus for developers, which is rarely reflected in any corresponding public benefit.

4) How have future residents already been harmed by private streets?

Private streets impose the cost of maintenance onto future homeowners who often don't realize that it is their obligation to maintain the adjacent private streets. These "new" owners then plead with the City for assistance with the cost of repairs. This happened several years ago for Miranda/Miranda Green where, after years of arguing, the City ended up paying about half of the cost of repairing the private streets. Look for similar requests and payments for street repairs in these new developments in 25 or 30 years.

5) Is the initiative specifically aimed at Alma Plaza?

No. This initiative is intended to address an issue that has been festering for years in almost every new development in Palo Alto, including Vantage and Echelon on East Meadow, the Campus for Jewish Life, Arbor Real and so on. Over 600 residential units have been built or approved with private streets in the past four years, more than in the past 40 years combined. If not stopped, private streets will become pervasive and create problems in other neighborhoods. As the problem is real and significant and acknowledged by the City's planning department staff, it only makes sense to fix it now, rather than letting things get worse.

6) What other developments will this initiative impact?

The initiative will apply to 801 Alma, 488 Charleston, Edgewood Plaza and other as-yet-unbuilt developments in various stages of planning and construction such as Alma Plaza.

7) Why is this initiative important throughout Palo Alto?

- It will reduce overflow traffic and inappropriate parking in adjacent neighborhoods.
- It will discourage private streets in projects that are now in process.
- It will encourage new developments to mesh with existing neighborhoods, which in turn won't feel threatened by overflow parking and traffic and will be much more likely to welcome the newcomers rather than build walls against them... and their cars.
- It eliminates the potential for a FAR bonus, and treats all parts of the City the same in terms of FAR and intensity of development.
- It reduces the chance that in the future the City will be asked to unexpectedly pay for repairs to private streets because the homeowners can't afford to repair the damaged streets that pose a hazard to access by garbage trucks, fire engines, ambulances and police.
- It eliminates the incentive for developers to intensely lobby the City's planning staff for approval of private streets and FAR inclusions because these perks would no longer offer so huge a profit potential.

For copies of the petition signature sheets, wording of the initiative and more background see www.2Narrow4Safety.org