

Rebuilding After Fire: Lessons from Sonoma County

Guidance Memo

In October of 2017, the Sonoma Complex Fires tragically took 24 lives, caused an estimated 100,000 people to evacuate countywide, and destroyed more than 5,300 homes. In 2019 and 2020, four more major fires brought destruction to the region. In response to these devastating fires and the painful struggle of communities to recover, Sonoma County agencies developed fast, innovative, and well-received approaches to homeowner support, permitting, code application, and temporary housing that offers important lessons for other California communities recently devastated by wildfires. This guidance memo, developed by the Casita Coalition in collaboration with Permit Sonoma and the ADU Center, is intended to share lessons learned in fire and disaster response housing, rebuilding and recovery that may be increasingly applicable to more places across California and the US as wildfires grow more frequent and more devastating in their impacts.



info@casitacoalition.org
casitacoalition.org

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Overview

To speed rebuilding efforts, planning staff and leadership in Sonoma County acted decisively to develop a coordinated, seamless emergency response effort for impacted homeowners with fire-damaged or destroyed homes in the unincorporated County or City of Santa Rosa, across all relevant departments, including planning, building, public works, assessor-recorder, as well as state and federal agencies tasked with emergency services. The response efforts followed fire victims through the stages of the recovery process by establishing local assistance centers, supporting the rebuilding process and providing emergency housing. Prioritizing lower-resourced homeowners, eliminating burdensome non-safety-related code requirements, reducing duplication of effort, and getting owners who lost homes back onto their property quickly were some of the critical priorities.

Their hard-learned lessons during recovery from destructive wildfires in 2017, 2019 and 2020 led to improvements in permitting efficiency and transparency that are still in use today as part of the effort to promote more housing options in Sonoma County.

Permit Sonoma's work to streamline permitting and improve processing prior to the fires laid the groundwork for this successful effort. Staff and leadership continue to assess and improve their processes and programs for efficiency and effectiveness. Read more on page 10.

How did these public agencies meet the challenges of fire recovery and help their communities rebuild?



Quickly Added Capacity

RFP for new Resiliency Permit Center was issued and awarded in 45 days. Contract priorities:

- Reduced Fees
- Short Review Times
- Performance Incentives
- Accountability

Waived and Reduced Fees

Total fees were reduced by as much as 80% for rebuild projects.

- Waived: Park and traffic mitigation fees; Planning admin fee; Affordable Housing
- Reduced: Plan Check fees; Building Permit fees



Provided Support Beyond Permitting

- Pre-application screenings
- Replacement documents
- 5-day permit turnarounds
- Guidance on contractor bid reviews, insurance, financing
- Options for temp occupancy
- Public workshops

Elements of Model Disaster Recovery and Rebuilding

After the fires, the daily demand for permit assistance was four times higher than regular averages. Existing government offices and staffing were unable to respond with their available resources or in existing offices.

Rather than slow the process to reflect the existing capacity constraints, Permit Sonoma, in collaboration with other departments in the County and the City, hired outside planners and plan checkers through a \$20MM RFP and contract to create a separate, stand-alone fire recovery permit assistance center and process, that coordinated between all agencies to ensure smooth, expeditious, and parallel processing of rebuild permits. The rebuild permit assistance center was located in temporary construction trailers on a single shared site, adjacent to the main permit office.

Note that fire survivors don't generally identify with city limits or county district boundaries; they identify with communities. For this reason, permit centers and websites should identify a community name first. Not until the the permitting stage does it become essential to separate applicants into jurisdiction residents. Some of the process steps and their critical components:

Process step	Description
Intake	Acknowledging the emotional toll of the losses, the intake office was staffed with compassionate, skilled workers with multiple language capacities. Intake specialists welcomed applicants, informed them of the process steps, and answered initial questions. Allowing extra time for listening was essential to build trust. A separate quiet space was provided with water, snacks and seating. The intake center helped homeowners determine the status of their property and where necessary directed them to a document center to restore their legal documents.
Restore Legal Documents Held By Different Public Agencies	Multiple departments created access to data files to assist homeowners who lost all records to fire damage, providing copies of replacement documents to speed their insurance claims and new building permitting and construction. Assessor's parcel maps, recorded title documents, building permit files, and others were made available as needed in step two of the permit center process. Many of the homes lost were older, and often little to no documentation survived the fire. Providing whatever public records were available to homeowners and creating a central file for each destroyed property with a common intake form proved invaluable for multi-agency coordination and for homeowner support. In the aftermath of the 2017 fires alone, more than 4,000 lost documents were replaced.
Pre-Application Meeting	All rebuild applicants were invited to schedule a no-cost pre-application meeting to review plans and materials before formal submission, saving staff and applicants time and eliminating additional corrections and re-submissions.

Process steps	Description
Planning and Building Permitting	<p>The separate Resiliency Permit Center, staffed and run in cooperation between a third-party contractor and county staff, handled all permits where rebuilding of homes destroyed by fire took place in the fire-affected zone. Homeowners choosing to rebuild on a property outside the fire zone utilized the standard permit office, as did non-residential rebuild applicants. Third-party consultant also provided plan check and inspection services.</p> <p>A 5-day turnaround for applications and 3 days for re-submissions was the benchmark, so significant efficiencies were established. As one example, many affected properties were in rural areas, with septic and well water. Many of these still had viable underground improvements but any above ground connections or electronics were destroyed. Planners and health departments allowed homeowners to reconnect new homes to existing systems with a simple statement from a consultant that the systems were viable and safe, rather than requiring more complex and costly upgrades or capacity studies. Sites were simply required to grade to the public street rather than requiring complex grading plans. Landscape plans were dispensed with or deferred.</p> <p>The County's permit center director was given wide latitude to make zoning judgement calls and to relieve codes as needed to allow reasonable rebuilding of the destroyed home, in the approximately place and size of the prior home with out a discretionary process.</p>
Building Department	<p>The chief building official followed a similar approach. All plan checking authority was given to the chief building official to relieve codes that were deemed unrelated to occupant safety or that did not exist at the time the original home was built.</p> <p>In particular, new codes requiring energy conservation standards, such as solar panels, EV charging etc, were dispensed with or deferred, given that rebuilt homes were often smaller in size, and used modern materials and energy-efficient appliances, double-paned windows, better insulation, etc, and therefore already represented a significant energy savings and reduced carbon impact vs the older homes they were replacing. Officials estimated that rebuilding homes with modern materials provided 90% of the greenhouse gas reduction without using stringent energy standards.</p> <p>Given that many homeowners were underinsured or on fixed incomes, containing rebuilding costs as much as possible was critical for the recovery effort.</p>

Key Strategies

The County of Sonoma has generously shared their lessons learned to assist other local agencies in developing their own effective and efficient response infrastructure to fires and other disasters. Links to learn more about the strategies below are on page 11.



Strategies	Description
Prioritize services	Focus assistance on affected lower-resourced homeowners most in need of assistance.
Expedite process while maintaining safety	Establish a safety-first approach and relieve requirements that are not essential to safety. For example, substitute findings of adequacy reports by septic contractors and well installers instead of full permit process or permit history. Allow homes built with modern materials to be deemed sufficiently energy efficient without requiring costly energy code upgrades such as rooftop solar, EV charging, heat pumps etc. Waive requirement for on-site EV charging or replace with EV-ready standards.
Clarify overarching goals	Create consistency of streamlining culture among cities, county and third-party staff.
Waive or reduce fees	Rebuild permits have reduced permit fee schedules reflecting reduced work, due to the already developed nature of sites with driveways, wells, septic systems, and other infrastructure. See examples on page 8.
Property taxes	Freeze property tax assessments at fire event value. Reassess only if square footage is added
Temporary Occupation of Alternative Dwellings	<p>Allow alternative home types for housing on affected lots: RVs, moveable tiny homes, others. Mobile service for pump-out of onboard sewage tanks is acceptable for sanitation. Flexibility for utility service is prioritized to get residents rehoused.</p> <p>Allow existing guest houses, pool houses, and other habitable residential accessory structures, as well as farmstays, bed and breakfast inns, resorts, retreats, camps and others to be used as temporary housing.</p>

Strategies, cont'd

Even with consulting support, rebuild processing took up 62% of staff time during the immediate aftermath and for several years after, as new fires impacted the region. After the contract ended for the third party permitting and inspection contractor, some of the staff was brought on as permanent staff of the main permit office. Online Resiliency Permit Center resources were retained.



Strategies	Description
Resiliency Permit Center	Parallel online and in-person resource centers in City of Santa Rosa and Sonoma County offered high volume one-stop shops for residential rebuilding permits, including pre-application screening, document replacement and expedited multi-department approvals for those rebuilding.
Accessory Dwelling Units Build and Occupy Prior to Rebuilding Primary	Sonoma County and Santa Cruz County, among others, allow homeowners to construct and move in to an ADU before the primary home is rebuilt, reducing the wait before families can return to their properties.
ADU and JADU rebuild incentives	As part of the County's work to relieve the housing affordability crisis in their region, homeowners rebuilding after local fires were encouraged to add ADUs and JADUs to their home plans, creating new rentals and helping homeowners with rental income.
Rebuild Progress Dashboard	Tracks permit and rebuilding progress for fire recovery, also processing times and peak office hours.
Welcome Home Kit	Following the journey of rebuilding applicants includes offering to-do lists and community resources for the unique tasks of returning to a home rebuilt in a fire-impacted area.
Preapproved multigenerational home plans	Permit Sonoma is considering developing multigenerational preapproved residential plan sets that include ADUs and JADUs, to lower costs for families rebuilding.
Fire prevention strategies	A robust program to assess defensible space and require brush clearing near homes also includes free chipper services to help residents deal with large quantities of vegetation trimmings. Info sheets on low-cost fire hardening strategies help homeowners make their homes more fire resistant.

Don't Delay the Permitting Process First Steps

Before applying for rebuilding permits you will need to:

1. File an Insurance Claim

Tip: The California Department of Insurance has a [Wildfire Resources](#) page where you can find information and obtain assistance with recovery issues related to insurance.

2. Check your property's Rapid Evaluation Safety Evaluation Status (RESA)

- [Walbridge and Meyers Fires RESA](#)
- [Glass Fire RESA](#)

3. Complete the process for Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Removal

4. [Mark your Septic System and Water Well Locations](#)

5. Complete the Fire Debris Removal Completion Certification information process

Note: A Grading Permit is NOT Required for Debris Removal

1. Starting the Permit Process

Be sure to review "[Don't Delay the Permitting Process](#)" above before continuing.

At this stage, you will be making decisions about your rebuilding project and finding out what your project entails. This includes the following topics:

- Where to Go Depending on Project Type/Location
- Pre Application Screening for Residential Construction
- Rebuilding with Accessory Dwelling Units in Mind
- Bridge Repair & Replacement Permitting Process
- Assistance in Evaluating Rebuilding Construction Proposals
- Agricultural and Commercial Property Use Permits
- Well and Septic Permit Exceptions
- Designing New Buildings

3. Construction & Inspection

a. Building Permit Issuance

Building permits will be issued after all required conditions for your project are approved. Smaller projects may be approved over the counter with larger project responses fast tracked. Permit fees are due at time of issuance.

b. Schedule Inspections

Visit [Schedule an Inspection](#) or call our automated inspection scheduler at [\(707\) 565-3551](#). We offer next-day inspections service.

c. Occupancy

A final inspection is required before occupancy. In some cases [temporary occupancy](#) may be allowed before the permit is finalized.

CASE TWO: NEW 2263 SQ FT SFD W/ATT'D 536 SQ FT GARAGE & 315 SQ FT RETAINING WALLS				
		Current	Proposed	Percent Reduction
Valuation	\$	307,572	\$ 192,256	37%
Impact Fees	\$	24,249	\$ -	100%
Building Fees	\$	10,527	\$ 6,785	36%
Total Fees	\$	34,776	\$ 6,785	80%

CASE THREE: NEW 1672 SQ FT SFD, 352 SQFT DECK, 46 SQ FT COVERED PORTH & 30 SQ FT RETAINING WALL				
		Current	Proposed	Percent Reduction
Valuation	\$	218,859	\$ 131,491	40%
Impact Fees	\$	20,466	\$ -	100%
Building Fees	\$	9,183	\$ 5,505	40%
Total Fees	\$	29,629	\$ 5,505	81%

Sample Fee Reductions Rebuild Permits Sonoma County--Fire Recovery

The fee reduction approach in Sonoma County balanced the reduced scope of permit services for rebuild properties with cost recovery and sustainability for local agencies, while acknowledging and seeking to relieve the severe cost burden of rebuilding on lower-resourced property owners.

Sonoma County: Use of RVs and Other Temporary Dwellings for Temporary Occupancy by Fire Survivors

The use and occupancy of travel trailers and other recreational vehicles (RVs) will be allowed with a temporary permit from Permit Sonoma as noted below. Permits are good for one year, but may be renewed. Recreational vehicles may be used on fire damaged sites only after the site is approved as safe for reconstruction by the County, state, or federal government and with the approval of a temporary permit.

Permit Submittal Requirements

- Temporary Emergency Occupancy Permit Application
- Written consent of the property owner
- Vehicle description, model, registration, and size
- Three (3) copies of a Site Plan showing location of the vehicle, water supply, electrical supply and sewage disposal plan including connection details
- Septic system findings report, if required
- Copy of pumping contract if holding tank is proposed to be used for sewage disposal

[Read more at Permit Sonoma](#)

Hookups

- **The recreational vehicle must be connected to an approved source of water, sewer, and electricity.**
- **Approved source of water includes public or private water systems or an existing well.**
- **An approved sewage disposal system includes either:**
 - **connection to sewer lateral;**
 - **connection to existing onsite septic system determined by the director to be intact and functioning with capacity for the additional residential use;**
 - or**
 - **temporary holding tank with contract for regular pumping.**
- **An approved source of electricity includes a permitted electrical service hook-up**

More Resources for Homeowners

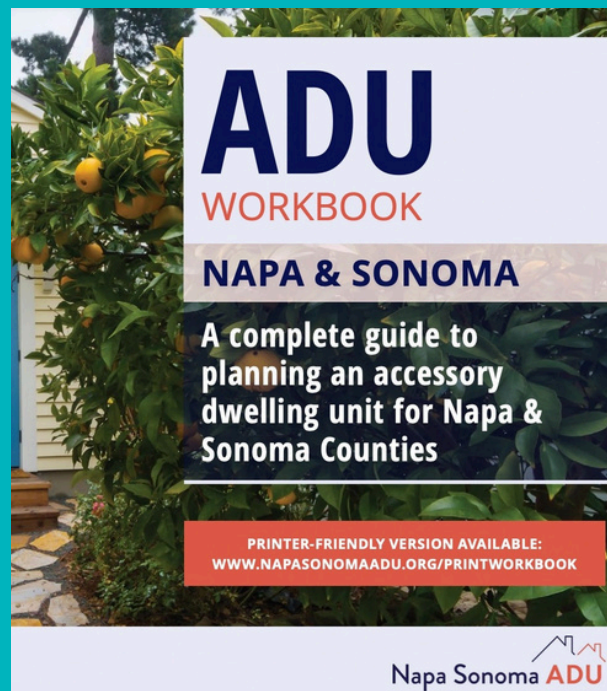
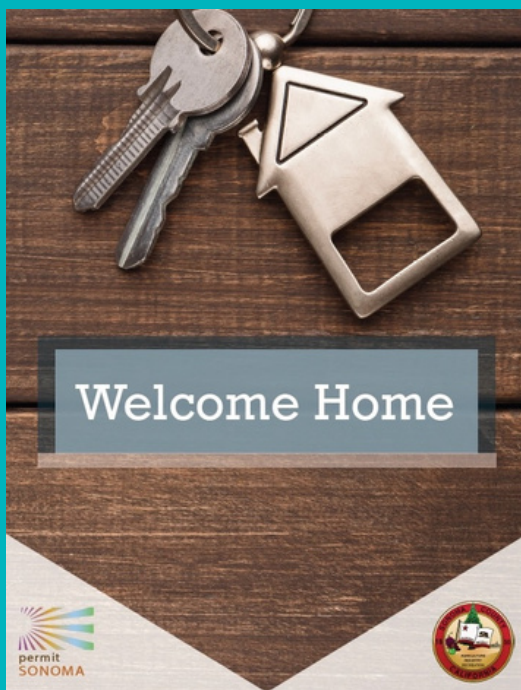
The California Department of Insurance has many resources to assist homeowners with insurance claims related to fire losses, fraud and scam prevention, and settling disputes with insurance companies.

[Learn more here.](#)

The screenshot shows the California Department of Insurance website. At the top, there is a header with the department's name and a photo of Ricardo Lara, the Insurance Commissioner. Below this is a navigation bar with links for 'File a Complaint', 'Consumers', 'Seniors', and 'Agents & Brokers'. The 'Consumers' link is selected. The main content area is titled 'Wildfire Resources' and includes a paragraph about assisting survivors of wildfires. Below this, there are several links to guides and checklists, each with a language selection button (English, Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese). The links include: 'Top 10 Tips for Wildfire Claimants', 'Don't Get Scammed After a Disaster', 'Tips to Avoid Being Victimized by an Insurance Scam', 'Residential Property Claims Guide', 'Home Inventory Guide', 'Evacuation Checklist for Policyholders', 'Top 10 Tips for Finding Residential Insurance', 'Residential Insurance Company Contact List', and 'Coverage for Flood, Mudflow, Mudslide, Debris Flow, Landslide, or other Similar Event After Wildfire - Fact Sheet'.

Sonoma County created a handbook to guide homeowners through the unique challenges of moving back onto their fire-damaged property into a rebuilt home.

Read the [handbook here.](#)



Things to Do When You Move into Your Home



There are a few things you must do before or as soon as you move into your home:

- Connect to utility services
- Verify adjustments to your property taxes
- Re-establish Mail Service

What You May Need To Do



The following items may apply to you. We recommend you double check to make sure all items are covered upon your move-in.

- Obtain Operational Manuals for Energy Efficient Household Components
- Test Backflow Devices
- Test Well Water
- Contact Your Insurance Agent

Links

Fire Recovery Resources

[Permit Sonoma](#)

[Resiliency Permit Center](#)

[Rebuilding from Fire FAQs \(Resiliency Permit Center\)](#)

[Maui Longterm Recovery Online Center--checklists, info](#)

[Local Housing Solutions case studies of disaster recovery efforts](#)

[YouTube "How to Rebuild as a Public Official with Permit Sonoma Director Tennis Wick"](#)

[City of Santa Rosa FAQs Debris Removal](#)

[City of Santa Rose Resilient City: Using Technology to Aid in Rebuilding video](#)

General Resources

[HCD ADU Handbook 2025](#)

[Casita Coalition Guidebooks](#)

[Casita Coalition YouTube Channel](#)

[Sign up for our newsletter.](#) Stay up to date on Casita Coalition events, resources and middle housing news.



Permit Sonoma's Commitment to Improvement

The improvements below were already in place at Permit Sonoma prior to the 2017 fires, greatly enhancing their disaster response

- Web-based services, including online permitting, fee payments, status check and inspection scheduling
- Permit dashboard with monthly permit data and processing times
- Videos on permit topics
- Pre-permit checklists and appointments help expedite projects
- Commonly used forms available online
- Phone apps allow contractors and residents to schedule inspections, manage projects, and move through the process more efficiently
- Workshops and webinars for the public
- Peak-hour information is posted so that customers may choose slower times to visit

In 2023, the Sonoma County Administrator's Office conducted a review of Permit Sonoma organizational and operations efficiency. Three committees were formed to review and implement the recommendations of the consultant: Customer Service, Express Permitting and Process Improvements. Casita Coalition encourages permit offices to regularly evaluate existing processing and identify areas for improvements.

Read more about Permit Sonoma's ongoing efforts [here](#).

We invite you to [donate](#) or [become a member](#), and add your voice to the coalition for housing choice and affordability. casitacoalition.org



REBUILD PROCESS

DISASTER RECOVERY CENTER

Location. Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) should be located as close to the affected community as possible without impacting response operations. Ensure locations have ample parking, large interior space, and many navigators outside and inside who are easy to identify (colorful vests, official ID badges, N95 masks, etc) so survivors get where they need to go.

Survivor Focus. Community members don't identify with city limits or county district boundaries; they identify with communities. For this reason, DRCs (and recovery websites) should identify a community first. Jurisdictional distinctions aren't important until survivors get to the permitting stage. For instance, in the 2017 Sonoma County Complex Fire, the County and the City of Santa Rosa created a common site in downtown Santa Rosa for survivors in both jurisdictions. Leaders need to decide whether they want DRCs to blend services for housed and unhoused considering how different their needs are.

Objective. Fire survivors often face complete material loss, as they typically don't have time to collect valuables before evacuating, unlike in flood and other disasters. Survivors need support beyond rebuilding houses; they are rebuilding their lives. It is essential for an LAC to provide a broad suite of services from local, state, and federal agencies in one place at one time. Comprehensive services minimize information vacuums and misinformation while building trust between survivors and government agencies, which may have been eroded during disaster response. Given these factors, the objective of the DRC should be to provide survivors with a roadmap and resources for comprehensive recovery in a single visit.

Preparation. Leadership and Training. As with any other recovery unit, the DRC needs a single point of contact leader who can report back to County leadership and EOC. Training needs to focus not on subject matter expertise – staff are there to perform the day jobs, just faster and more directly – but on how the DRC components work together and how staff need to extend sensitivity to survivors tempered with the need to provide service to as many people as possible in a limited amount of time.

Components + Sequence. DRC components and sequence should track the best order for understanding recovery because survivors are exhausted, traumatized, and angry. Help them get organized!

Welcome. First impressions are critical. The first station should welcome people with multiple language interpreters, accessibility providers, and child and elder care. Swag bags with small water bottles, energy bars, and a DRC narrative with map so survivors can track their progress. Intake specialists inform survivors what to expect, answer initial questions, and LISTEN.

Identity. Many survivors lose everything including driver's licenses, Social Security cards, passports, birth certificates, and marriage certificates. They need these documents replaced so they can prove to public and private organizations who they are. This station needs staffers from DMV, Social Security, State Department, Defense Department, and Homeland Security so

survivors can leave with restored identities. This step often positively surprises survivors and builds trust.

Individual Assistance. This station provides information from FEMA, CalOES, Small Business Administration staffers on individual assistance and loans.

Tenant Assistance. While tenants have not lost real property, they have lost personal property. They need help with tenant assistance, protection, and relocation services with support from community development specialists and NGO staffers at this station.

Businesses. While some of the survivor needs and opportunities are universal, some factors are inherently different for businesses and their employees. Business property owners, tenants, and employees suffer as survivors in different ways. Local economic development agencies, chambers of commerce, California GoBiz, and Federal SBA representatives can support each of these groups.

Debris Removal. This station provides a great opportunity to provide a brief overview of the rebuilding process beginning with site restoration. Survivors desperately want to return to their property. They need to understand what needs to happen before they can return to look for remaining possessions. Human remains and toxic materials clearance and debris removal need to be summarized. This station needs staffing from Environmental Health, Hazmat/Fire Prevention, CalOES, and potentially USACE.

Insurance. This station is critical to rebuilding because it helps survivors understand what policy holders can expect and how to advocate for maximum funding. United Policy Holders are critical at this station as a nonprofit advocate. California Department of Insurance civilian and enforcement staff are helpful. Seats should be offered to all insurance companies, too.

Builder. This station focuses on construction resources and consumer protection. It's a key place to bring representatives from the building industry, architecture, NGOs which can help underserved residents, and Contractors State Licensing Board Law Enforcement officers.

Property Information. Most survivors don't have house design records indicating property lines, structures, and design. Having county building, recorder and assessor staffers at this station allows survivors to access permit records, deeds, subdivision maps, and assessor notes.

Permitting! Hopefully reconstruction of residences are ministerial permits with objective design standards. Legal nonconforming determinations and streamlining by planning and building staffers will help here. Commercial building design review guidance will be helpful here.

Checkout. Every disaster service presents an opportunity to learn, assess, and improve for future incidents. Before leaving, survivors should be briefly surveyed about their experience and any suggestions for improving DRC services. Staff should also answer any remaining questions and remind survivors to pick up their children and elders.

PERMITTING

Objective. Defining the objective of rebuild permitting helps customers and the public understand the scope of services extended to fire survivors. In Sonoma County's experience, we declared repeatedly the primary goal of rebuild permitting was to keep Sonomans in

Sonoma County by getting them back on their property as soon as possible. The permitting process focused on accelerated application processing at reduced fees. While the highest priority was to return fire survivors to their homes, the county extended rebuild priority processing and fee discounts to successors-in-interest, too, so survivors could sell their lots where they suffered so much trauma and relocate elsewhere in the county or beyond – whatever was best for them. This practice continues. The administrative nuances of discerning who qualifies and who does not on a personal basis in a large permitting environment has proven difficult in other jurisdictions, too.

Administration. A threshold issue should focus on whether to use regular staffing or create distinct staffing with agency employees or consultants. Existing permitting is vital to supporting the local economy, so unless an agency has excess capacity, separate staffing provides a better solution. Additionally, fire survivors need additional support that can be disrupted by the normal bustle of a permit center. Survivors are traumatized; they often need unlimited time to express themselves. For reasons, Sonoma County established a new stand alone Rebuild Division with all necessary disciplines staffed by consultants in space separate from regular operation yet linked to a common digital permitting system for monitoring and recording purposes.

Review Scope. As a county with many rural residences with limited urban services, we used our experience in damage assessment to determine permitting scope. While fire destroyed most buildings, driveways, well, and septic systems remained intact. Driveways could be resurfaced; electronics on wells and septic systems could be repaired without permits in most cases. This experience allowed staff to limit permitting scope to new structures and grading around them to ensure positive drainage. Consequently, a narrower scope led to reduced fees.

Fee Waiver? Waiving fees is not a good idea in communities where most homes are insured because policies include agency fee payment. In this situation, waivers do not benefit survivors and diminish agency funds to the detriment of the general public and regular customers who pay for the waiver subsidy.

Staff Selection. Hiring additional agency or consultant staff depends on pre-disaster agency capacity and civil service hiring speed. In most megafire recovery settings, agencies have experienced success hiring consultants for expertise and flexibility. Given the magnitude of loss and permitting costs, competitive bidding leads to the best costs and service for survivors and reduced burden on the agency.

Contract. We learned over four megafires what provisions best served us in the original agreement and revisions made to it. Performance standards focused on: 1) minimum on-site staffing levels; 2) one permit vs. multiple permits; 3) use spec sheets as references; 4) five days to first plan check; 5) break even with one fee; 6) simple billing; and invoice and payment schedules.

Intake. Unlike most open reception areas in permitting centers, a smaller more intimate space with coffee, water, and healthy snacks signal a welcoming environment. A private side space(s) where traumatized survivors can compose themselves is really important. As mentioned under DRC Property Information, building, recorder and assessor records such as building permit records, deeds, subdivision maps, and assessor notes should be available to intake staffers and survivors so information gaps in rebuild applications can be filled.

Submittal Requirements. While most building departments have submittal requirements, they may benefit from review given the reduced scope of review and the need to have as complete a

submittal as possible to facilitate expedited plan check. Any suspension of established deferrals to allow one plan check, such as truss calculations, should be discussed with trades representatives before the program begins to avoid conflict as much as possible.

Plan Check. In Sonoma County's experience, three factors specially aid accelerated plan check: five day first plan check, use of Digital Plan Room or similar software program, and Greenlining of plans to prevent interruption for minor omissions or errors that staff can correct through minor plan changes.

Inspection. Just as with regular plan check staff, building inspectors could be overwhelmed quickly if they do not have consultant support. Having plan checker and inspectors from the same consulting companies under the same contact can assist in expedited review and consultant oversight.

Surveys. Consider the uses of simple digital surveys at intake, issuance and final inspection to monitor program weaknesses, successes, and contract compliance. Think about how use of survey results could inform contact check-ins at key points in performance.

EMERGENCY HOUSING

Overview. Please find relevant Urgency Ordinances, accompanying draft reports, and materials related to the Tiny Home Ordinance (8-1-1) [here](#). Both 2017 and 2019 are included since there were some lessons learned in implementing from 2017. The original Ordinance is Chapter 40, adopted by Urgency Ordinance in 2017, which was later used to address the 2019 Kincadee fire (Chapter 40A), 2020 LNU Lightning (Chapter 40C) and Glass Fires (Chapter 40D), 2021 Walbridge, and finally amended to address Covid (Chapter 40B). These ordinances have gone through successive extensions and were finally extended in 2024, which did require both Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors vote (File number ORD24-0008).

Summary. The Ordinances were primarily focused on streamlining, rebuilding, and interim housing opportunities for displaced persons. The term "displaced persons" has been broadly interpreted to account for a surge in secondary displacement following the events and a more generalized lack of housing availability as a result of the fires.

Recovery provisions include the elements list below.

- Suspending occupancy limits on seasonal and extended seasonal farmworker housing so that such housing may be occupied year-round.
- Allowing existing guest houses, pool houses, and other habitable residential accessory structures, as well as marketing accommodations, farmstays, bed and breakfast inns, resorts, retreats, camps and similar uses, to be used as temporary housing.
- Allowing temporary housing use and rental of existing dwellings and RVs on agricultural lots, subject to specified limitations.
- Waiving permitting fees for accessory dwelling units constructed along with a reconstructed primary dwelling within the burn areas.
- Specifying requirements for reconstructing legal nonconforming structures.

- Streamlining design review for reconstruction of fire-damaged structures in scenic landscape units.

Residential Use of Recreational Vehicles (RVs) and Manufactured Homes.

Chapters 40 and 40A include limited allowances for the residential use of RVs and manufactured homes as interim housing. These provisions have been well utilized, with more than 190 permits issued for the placement of RVs and manufactured homes as interim housing since 2017. This approach allows fire survivors to remain on their home sites during the rebuild process. While the vast majority of RV permits were issued in the 8 months after the 2017 Complex Fire, Permit Sonoma has continued to issue permits for the fire events at a reduced level through 2025. Approximately 68% of parcels with structures destroyed by fires since 2017 have initiated the rebuilding process. Sonoma County has preserved Chapter 40 and 40A interim RV housing provisions within burn areas.

Provisions for allowing use of recreational vehicles include:

- Permitting use of recreational vehicles after lots have been cleared for reconstruction following debris removal (defined to include motor homes, travel trailers, truck campers, camping trailers, and similar vehicles that meet enumerated criteria) as temporary emergency housing in residential zoning districts outside the coastal zone, subject to specified standards.
- Allowing year-round occupancy of RVs, tent camps and campgrounds in K zoning districts, subject to specified standards and with a zoning permit.
- Allowing groupings of RVs and manufactured homes as temporary emergency housing in Public Facilities, and industrial zoning districts outside the coastal zone, subject to temporary use permit.

Prohibition on New Vacation Rentals in the Burn Area. Chapters 40 and 40A previously included provisions to restrict new short term vacation rentals within the burn area. Immediately following the fires, the Board of Supervisors adopted an urgency measure prohibiting new vacation rentals county-wide in order to make more housing available to fire survivors. In its review of this action on 23 January 2018, the Board chose not to extend the countywide prohibition because so many existing vacation rental owners had leased their properties to fire survivors. Instead, on 23 October 2018, the Board amended Chapter 40 to prohibit new vacation rentals within the burn area only, to prevent the loss of residential lands and existing housing stock to visitor serving uses. The measure was also intended to reduce speculative investment in and development of lots in the burn area for the purpose of creating new visitor-oriented use. At this time the prohibition has been amended after a comprehensive remapping related to an updated Vacation Rental Ordinance. On 13 December 2022, the Board adopted Ordinance No. 6398 extending the chapters' expiration to 31 December 2024, and discontinuing provisions in Chapters 40, 40A, 40C, and 40D that prohibited new short-term rentals within burn areas.

Ordinance Lessons Learned. Some of our challenges in ongoing implementation are listed below.

Tracking permit extension timeline. Partially due to successive events the timelines to track permit extensions have been complicated and are not clear within the ordinances. Clear dates as to when the permits will finally expire based on the original approval date that are updated with each potential extension would greatly improve transparency. Additionally, if possible back dating the approval date from which the extension could be applied to account for recently approved projects that will get stuck in development timelines would be more effective as all development is subject to the same constraints after such an event.