

[Advice on rebuilding after fires — from people who've lived it](#)

LAist

Full panel discussion from LAist article by Aiko Offner.

Be realistic about timing and costs, join forces with your community and allow yourself some guilty pleasures. That's the advice of fire survivors and rebuilding experts who participated in LAist's discussion about the six-month anniversary of the Eaton and Palisades fires. The discussion was moderated by climate and environment reporter Erin Stone on Wednesday at the Crawford Family Forum in Pasadena.

The panelists included Zaire Calvin, who spoke from his experience leading community rebuilding efforts in Altadena. He lost his sister, five properties and the community where he had grown up in the Eaton Fire.

Also on the panel was Annie Barbour, a program liaison at United Policy Holders, which helps people navigate insurance after natural disasters. She didn't seek out the role — it found her after the 2017 Tubbs Fire in Northern California destroyed her home and she had to navigate the rebuilding process.

The third panelist was Dan Faina of Williams Homes, which has built homes in L.A. County for 30 years. The group became active in fire recovery after helping communities rebuild after the Thomas Fire in 2017.

During the panel discussion, Barbour pointed out that people who must rebuild after wildfires take on the work of being an insurance expert, learning how to be a contractor and taking care of themselves and their family.

"You guys now have like three, four full-time jobs," she said.

Here are some of the panelists' insights on navigating this new burden.

Have a long-term perspective

The panelists emphasized that rebuilding is a long process — for which you need the right people and the right plans, all within your budget.

Faina explained the importance of knowing “the whole journey” of rebuilding before jumping into the first steps.

After the Thomas Fire, which resulted in 21 deaths and burned more than 1,000 structures in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, Faina remembered that survivors sometimes spent \$250,000 on designs only to realize that they would not be possible.

“Folks had spent and dreamed and come up with a design that they had no ability to build,” he said.

An unrealistic plan can leave a property owner open to unethical contractors, who may promise to build within a given budget, but then raise the price with change orders.

Barbour's advice was to do more than check a contractor's license. Google them, she said. Check the news and their surety bond. And most of all, “make sure that you interview that contractor,” Barbour said.

Rebuild as a community

Coordinating rebuilding timelines and plans lowers costs, provides a resource network and can result in a real neighborhood you want to return to, the panelists agreed.

They highlighted economies of scale — the more people using the same company, the lower the costs to individuals.

Faina gave the example of grading, the phase of construction that requires bulldozers, excavators and dump trucks to shape large amounts of earth. It can take \$25,000 to \$50,000 just to get the equipment to a site. Rebuilding alone would mean that “you're eating the entire cost of that.”

If instead you can get one contractor to grade two, 10 or 20 lots, everyone saves.

Barbour acknowledged the difficulty of getting larger groups to buy in, but the support that a community can offer is unique.

“Every survivor has this ball of anxiety right here,” she said, pointing at her chest. “It’s spinning, and it’s forcing you to make decisions that you may not be ready to make.”

Building together, you can rely on neighbors to help make those decisions.

Calvin also emphasized that the goal is to rebuild a community — not a single house.

“If one person builds their house and the rest of your block’s not built, then what? My neighbors aren’t there. The infrastructure’s not there,” Calvin said. “None of this makes sense.”

Take care of yourself

Barbour highlighted the numerous ways that surviving a wildfire is a traumatic experience.

Calvin, a therapeutic behavioral specialist, said he uses self-therapy, working out, fasting and praying as he works through the Eaton Fire.

But when Barbour pressed him, he admitted another technique — getting “chocolate-chip-cookie wasted.”

“Even though I train and tell everybody what to do when it comes to that, I go home and bake so many cookies and just eat them and laugh every night, and I can’t stop,” he said.

Barbour smiled, and the audience in the LAist auditorium chuckled.

“You’re going to rely on things that maybe aren’t the best,” Barbour said. “That may be a tub of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream and just binge watching some program.”

But a mostly harmless vice or two will be OK if it gets you to the end of the process: when a house is built where your home once stood.

“It’s not going to be your home,” she said, “until you go back in and make it your home.”

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Source: <https://uphelp.org/advice-on-rebuilding-after-fires-from-people-whove-lived-it/> Date: March 7, 2026