

[Fire recovery in Sonoma County shows mixed results on 2nd anniversary, experts say](#)

The North Bay Business Journal

Two years after the October firestorm that swept the North Bay, recovery efforts are both good and not so great.

Houses are being rebuilt, the destroyed northwest Santa Rosa neighborhood of Coffey Park is coming back strong, insurance struggles and construction costs remain, and mental health care resources need ongoing reinforcing. Those takeaways were presented Friday at the Business Journal's 10th annual Impact Sonoma conference.

It has been focused for the past two years on recovery and rebuilding. The gathering was held at the Hyatt Regency Sonoma Wine Country hotel in Santa Rosa.

Brad Bollinger, Business Journal publisher, opened the conference by telling the more than 250 attendees that as of last month 63% of the homes lost in the 2017 fires and 93% of the homes lost in Coffey Park alone are in some state of reconstruction.

State Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, the morning's first speaker, addressed how fires have changed the fabric of the state.

"Emergency preparedness and fire prediction have now become part of our lives," McGuire said. "We don't need polls to be able to tell us this, but for the first time in the modern history of the Golden State, 81% of California voters believe that the risk of wildfire is an extremely or very serious problem. This is ahead of their concerns of the rising cost of health care across America."

Locally, two years after the fires, two-thirds of the 3,043 homes destroyed are in the permit process, in construction or have been rebuilt, McGuire said. And in unincorporated Sonoma County, of the 1,949 properties with destroyed structures, 1,372 of them also are in one of the three stages of the rebuild.

Frustrations around insurance was one of the main subjects tackled by the speakers, both in their presentations and in response to questions from conference attendees.

"The bottom line is this: We're seeing record numbers of nonrenewals across California, particularly in our neck of the woods and heavily forested areas," McGuire said. "We don't even have the authority to

be able to see total nonrenewal numbers on an annual basis.”

McGuire went on to thank insurance companies for volunteering that data this year, and said to watch for continued efforts toward enforced transparency.

“You’re going to see a piece of legislation that will be advancing coming up in January that will mandate that all nonrenewal numbers have to be reported to the Department of Insurance in March of every year,” McGuire said.

David Rabbitt, chairman of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, noted that slow-moving permitting can be frustrating, especially at the federal level with numerous agencies and bureaucracies to contend with.

“We continue to advocate and lobby, and are fortunate that we have great rapport in Washington, Sacramento and here locally with our nonprofit partners that are helping us do the same,” Rabbitt said.

“And while there has been a great deal of frustration among many fronts, especially with construction costs, construction schedules, finding a contractor and, of course, the insurance policies, I believe the county has been a partner in this process rather than an impediment.”

Before the fires and ever since, Debbie Mason, CEO of the Healthcare Foundation Northern Sonoma County, has been on the front lines advocating for stronger mental health care. She’s been leading initiatives, fundraising efforts, media campaigns, and the creation of mental health resources for anyone to access, free of charge.

At the conference, Mason discussed the need to help children cope and stressed that they are the future of the region’s workforce.

“If children) don’t have social-emotional coping skills, we’re going to see some real serious and prolonged mental health issues,” she said.

Mason also addressed statistics around post-traumatic stress disorder.

“The median time of PTSD onset is 12 years, so people walk around in pain for a long time trying to process it themselves and often try to deny it,” she said.

Also speaking at the conference were Jeff Okrepkie, founder of Coffey Strong; Amy Bach, executive director of United Policyholders; Tom Schwedhelm, mayor of Santa Rosa; Doug Hamilton, president of North Coast Builders Exchange; and Robin Bowen, CEO of Child Parent Institute.