

[Larimer County officials begin to plan for High Park fire recovery work](#)

Reporter Hearld

Larimer County will hire a disaster recovery manager for six months to help the county respond to the High Park fire, now at 83,262 acres, 248 homes lost and in its 18th day.

As more than 2,000 firefighters continue to battle the blaze, now at 55 percent containment, county commissioners held a work session Monday to look at the costs the county may need to bear as the area attempts to recover from what is now the second-biggest fire in state history.

Commissioners agreed County Manager Linda Hoffmann should begin searching for someone to be the temporary recovery manager.

She said she hopes to have that person working by July 15.

In a nearly two-hour work session, commissioners examined 34 line items of 52 that Hoffmann identified as potential fire recovery costs, and said they would schedule another work session to look at the others.

The list identifies \$15 million in costs and only \$4 million in revenue for recovery efforts, Commissioner Tom Donnelly noted.

“We need to plan for a worst case,” Hoffmann told him, noting there may be more than \$4 million available for recovery.

She said she is hearing the overall fire costs could be in the \$40 million to \$50 million range.

‘Just Watch the Money’

Much of the advice the county has received from state about potential needs and costs is based on what has happened in other areas hit by fire or other disasters.

Hoffmann said the town manager of Windsor, who has experience recovering from a devastating tornado in 2008, told her, “just watch the

money ... because the money can get away from us very fast.”

The second emergency declaration by Gov. John Hickenlooper allocates up to \$25 million for both fire suppression and recovery.

Hoffmann said she is trying to find out if that means the county can use some of that money for recovery, “assuming there’s any money left after fighting the fire.”

The fire cost as of Sunday night was \$29.6 million.

Other suggestions for a county role and cost estimates are based on what happened after other devastating fires.

Commissioner Steve Johnson said county officials should look at whether there are things other groups can do, and at what county government needs to do.

“I don’t think we should do things that an insurance company is going to reimburse for,” he added.

Hoffmann said state experts think only 10 or 15 percent of fire victims are not insured, whereas county staff at Disaster Recovery Center, citing what they are hearing from people coming in, think the percentage is probably closer to 25 percent.

Johnson also asked if there are things that could be done more efficiently if the county handles them, such as cleanup.

Hoffmann said that’s what Boulder County did in the wake of its Fourmile Canyon fire in 2010.

She also cited fire recovery efforts in El Dorado County, Calif., where 254 houses burned in the Angora fire in 2007.

There property owners signed agreements to allow workers hired by the county to enter property to clean up and to reimburse the county from their insurance if they had it.

In Boulder County, the effort focused on prequalifying contractors as a service to fire victims. People had no obligation to use them, but they had some assurance the contractors were legitimate, protecting them against contractors who might take advantage of them.

But more-comprehensive debris removal could be costly. Hoffman based her estimate of \$7.5 million on the El Dorado County fire.

It got \$3.5 million in reimbursement from insurance and the rest from the state of California. But Colorado officials have already told

Hoffmann not to count on that kind of help here.

Even if the county does not take on the work itself, “you don’t want burned debris to sit there forever. You want it cleaned up” as a safety and health issue, she said.

Commissioner Lew Gaiter asked how that would affect people who do not have insurance to help them bear the costs, so don’t do the work.

“Then you lien their property,” Hoffmann said.

She said other places have set up funds to help deal with unmet needs, which citizen groups can use for hardship cases. “I almost feel this is something we need.”

Helping With

Donations

Donation management also came under commissioner scrutiny.

Gaiter said he did not see why the county needs to be involved in donation management at all, but Hoffmann told him officials in both Boulder County and Windsor said they ended up having to deal with grocery stores full of donated items that victims did not need. She said she wants to make sure that does not happen here.

Johnson noted that messages are going out explaining exactly what kinds of donations fire victims need, and he hopes people will heed those instructions.

Gaiter said he hopes United Way could help with the \$20,000 estimated cost of bringing in United Policyholders to hold monthly meetings with people who lost their homes to help them deal with insurance companies.

He also wondered if there were other ways to bring local residents in to help with recovery, such as volunteers to work on rebuilding private roads. “We have a very philanthropic community,” he noted.

Erosion Control

Another possible cost that got commissioner attention was \$2.5 million to serve as local sponsor for the Natural Resources Conservation Service Emergency Watershed Protection program, which assesses severely

damaged areas and does reseeding and other work to stabilize hillsides and catch silt. It also will determine which houses are at increased risk of flooding so the county can contact owners and advise about the need for flood insurance.

Hoffmann said she hoped to enlist area agencies, including the water providers in Greeley and Fort Collins, and area breweries who could provide some of the \$2.5 million needed, as they have an interest in protecting the water they use.

She said she will carry the message back that the county will help NCRS find a local partner, but feels matched money needs to come from other agencies.

When erosion control work begins, officials will need permission from every property owner affected, which could be as many as 700 people, Hoffmann said. She said the county could seek a declaration from the governor delegating authority to the county to do the work so it doesn't have to try to get signed permission slips from 700 people in a timely manner.

But Gaiter said he feels the county should try to contact those owners. "Some of the people who live up in Rist Canyon, they don't have a high level of trust in the government," he said.

Other Expenses

Other costs the commissioners discussed include development of a Web page for fire information, trying to decide whether county staff could do it themselves and put other projects on hold, or if they should hire it out.

Hoffmann also advised the county should spend \$20,000 for rolloffs to collect spoiled food in the fire area. "It's something we have to do as a health issue."

Commissioners also briefly discussed flood protection. Hoffmann noted that Boulder County paid \$500,000 for flood protection after its fire but officials were disappointed with results, and she recommended Larimer County not do that.

In addition to the six-month, full-time position to help

coordinate recovery efforts, Hoffmann recommended the county hire an administrative assistant to be training to continue the recovery efforts for another year after the six months are up, and to also provide accounting coordination for tracking and reporting grants given for recovery work.

She said the total cost of both positions could be around \$170,000.

Boulder County hired a recovery manager for two years and a part-time administrative assistant for two years after the Fourmile Canyon fire, she said. "I think we need it. But I don't think we need it for two years," she said.

Other costs the commissioners looked at include a possible \$1 million allocation for replacing damaged culverts, \$10,000 for replacing damaged road signs; \$200,000 for debris removal in public rights of way, and \$60,000 for weed control.

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