

‘Pioneers’ choose to rebuild against the fire odds in Butte County

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PARADISE — People submit applications for rebuilding permits to the town of Paradise and Butte County every day. On Nov. 1, it was Wade and Courtney Petersen’s turn.

“It’s just a really exciting moment,” she said as she filled out the paperwork in town hall.

Almost a year earlier, the Petersens learned their home in lower Paradise had burned to the ground in the Camp Fire. Soon after, they booked a contractor to make sure the option to rebuild was there and that they wouldn’t be left behind as the rush to build raised prices and stretched labor. But it still took a while to make the final decision.

“We looked at renting in Chico. We looked at moving out of state. Every route led back to rebuilding,” she said. “Sometimes, I think, ‘Am I being stupid? Is it going to burn again?’ But I just want to go home.” Paradise is where the couple came together, she said. Their neighborhood is full of people rebuilding. They hope to be in their new home — slightly bigger and improved from the previous one — in the spring. They’re joining a group of Camp Fire survivors embracing what they call a “pioneer spirit” to rebuild.

Challenges of rebuilding

A year after the Camp Fire destroyed 14,000 homes, or 15 percent of the housing stock in Butte County, trucks bringing in building materials have replaced those carrying debris out. Paradise, Magalia, Concow and Butte Creek Canyon are a patchwork of empty lots full of red dirt, trailers, surviving homes and new construction. As of Nov. 6, 19 homes have been completely rebuilt. Nearly 400 replacement homes have been permitted.

The rebuilding is not inclusive. Location, class and luck has left each of the 35,000 people permanently displaced from the Camp Fire at very different points on the path of recovery. One of the main dividing lines is insurance: Among those who signed up for Federal Emergency Management Agency aid, 98 percent of renters had no insurance, while only 15 percent of homeowners had no insurance, according to a May housing assessment. Around two thirds were likely under-insured, according to United

Policyholders. With new construction prices rising to \$300 a foot, people are dipping into savings or scrambling after loans to pay for new homes.

Even those able to afford to rebuild are facing extra challenges because of precarious infrastructure: Parts of the water systems in Paradise and Magalia are still contaminated with benzene, a volatile organic compound harmful to human health. Pacific Gas and Electric Corp. turned off the power six times and has said frequent and lengthy black-outs could continue for as long as the area expects to rebuild.

That's taking its toll.

"In January, our plan was to rebuild," said Leonard Cino, who lost a home on Lovely Lane in Paradise..

"Today, I question that."

Though he has longtime ties to the town, he was only just moving in to a family home last year when the fire came. Two homes across the street survived. They both went on the market. Despite his misgivings, Cino finds it hard to give up the dirt that belonged to his wife's family. He's back, living in a trailer, drinking from a private well because Paradise Irrigation District hasn't cleared his water yet and getting power from a generator. Bundles of planks for his new prefabricated home now lie scattered on the property. He's paying extra for a composite deck and special eaves, some of the only changes he feels are in his control to make to make his new home more fire-resistant.

"I'm not sure about the next phase, because I'm running out of money," he said.

Compared to other fires

Proportionally, the rebuilding after the Camp Fire is behind other communities recovering from recent Northern California fires. In Santa Rosa, nearly half of the 2,700 homes lost after the Tubbs Fire were in the process of being rebuilt a year later. A year after the Carr Fire, around 15 percent of the around 1,000 homes lost had been permitted for rebuilding. Here, less than three percent of the nearly 14,000 residences lost have been issued new permits.

That's not unexpected, given that Butte County as a whole only built around 300 homes in 2018. The lag is also partly due to the scale of the debris removal required before construction could begin. A couple thousand properties still haven't received the all-clear yet.

The town of Paradise has said it is ahead of schedule: it expected to only issue 300 permits by the end of 2019. Now, it's on its way to surpass its new goal of 500. The latest estimate puts the town's residents at at least 4,000. The Butte County Association of Governments forecasts Paradise to reach its pre-Camp Fire population of 26,000 only under the most robust growth scenario, and then not until some time between 2030 and 2035.

For Dayna Mock and her young family, emotional ties to the town drove them to rebuild. Her husband was raised in Paradise and was sure he wanted to come back so their young family of five could keep

making memories there. So they put in an early application to rebuild and waited, five people crowded in to an 18-foot trailer. In late August, they moved in to their new modular home. It was the day before Mock's son's fifth birthday. To celebrate, she baked a cake to celebrate in the first real oven she had access to in a year.

The layout of the house is the exact same as before, so the kids adjusted quickly. But the ghost of what was still hangs heavy sometimes: Mock catches herself reaching for an item she remembered placing on a shelf or in a cabinet that's long since turned to ash.

Being back is a mix of relief and stress, she said.

"It took a lot of patience. Now, we're starting to see more people come back, which is good," she said.

"That brings hope."