

Rebuilding Sonoma County: Sonoma Valley grapples with slow recovery, big housing gap

The Press Democrat

Ramona Nicholson was awake late on Oct. 8 listening to the wind blow. Upon hearing that fires had broken out in Napa, she drove from her Sonoma-area house, on the grounds of her family's Nicholson Ranch Winery, over the hill to Old Sonoma Road to get a better look.

By the time she turned around to head back, the fires were menacing her property.

"I grabbed my pets and wallet and wanted to find our photo albums, as well, but I just didn't have time," she said. As she raced out the driveway, the flames had reached her house. A firetruck was pulling in, but the captain told her he had no backup — all the other trucks had been sent elsewhere.

Nicholson, who owns the property, lost her family home, her father's house, her treasured Corvette convertible, 10 other small buildings and several rail cars on the winery property that first night of the fires. The winery itself was spared and reopened in mid-October.

A United Policyholders survey conducted this spring found that almost 70 percent of those affected by the fires believe they do not have enough insurance to replace or rebuild their homes, with an even larger share still resolving their claims. Nicholson found herself "adequately" insured. She estimated that her insurance will cover about three-quarters of her rebuilding costs.

The architect leading her rebuilding efforts, Vic Conforti, hopes to pour a new foundation next week. Hers is one of four fire rebuilds he is working on.

Nicholson is using the opportunity to build a better version of the 1940s ranch house lost in the blaze.

"I grew up in that house and it's actually great to be able to reconfigure the space more logically," said Nicholson who, since the fires, has been roughing it with her teenage daughter in the property's old bunkhouse.

Nicholson, 54, and her ex-husband, Deepak Gulrajani, who leases the winery and vineyards back from her, are well-known in Sonoma and she is thankful for the support she has received, particularly from such organizations as the Sonoma Valley Rotary club, Seeds of Learning and Habitat for Humanity. Volunteers have spent countless hours picking up nails and metal from the grounds and have even

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helped build a new hothouse for the property.

“I’m in good spirits,” she said. “I lost a lot but it has been nice to live life a little sparer.”

Housing driving policy

A report issued in late April by the city of Sonoma provided the most precise accounting to date of Sonoma Valley homes lost in the fires. It found a total of 407 destroyed homes, plus 487 additional structures burned across 29,000 acres. Glen Ellen lost 183 homes, 140 were destroyed in Kenwood, 48 in the Mayacamas Volunteer Fire District, 33 in the Schell-Vista area at the southern end of the valley and three in the northern end in Eldridge.

The losses deepened a housing shortage that was already acute before the fires. Countywide, the five-year need could be as high as 30,000 homes, according to a May 10 report released by the Community Foundation of Sonoma County.

Based on the rush of recent applicants for affordable housing in Sonoma Valley, Supervisor Susan Gorin, who represents the region, estimated that at least 3,000 additional units are needed in Sonoma Valley to house families and the future workforce.

The issue is driving post-fire policymaking and philanthropy. The Community Foundation’s Resilience Fund, which had raised \$13 million by early May, expects to focus largely on issues of housing. The fund was created to address the mid- to long-term needs of Sonoma County during the recovery and rebuilding process.

The Rebuild North Bay Foundation is also focused on the long-term recovery process. Jennifer Gray Thompson, the group’s executive director and a longtime resident of The Springs north of Sonoma, expects construction labor shortages to be a major stumbling block.

“We are heartened that groups such as La Luz Center, CTE Career and Technical Education of Sonoma County), North Bay Labor Council and North Coast Builders Exchange are all working hard right now to train skilled labor, but ultimately it will not be enough,” she said.

She mentioned interim housing solutions including converted shipping containers, retired cruise ships or barges — shelter that can be moved or reused afterward.

“Primarily, we focus on working with the labor groups,” she said. “We listen first; act second. If this is feasible and collaborative, we are supportive. We want the bulk of the work to go to locals whenever possible, but it is not enough to get us through the rebuild.”

Seeking building permits

The first step for those who want to rebuild is a building permit.

For all those outside Santa Rosa city limits, that means working with the county's new Resiliency Permit Center, opened in February. The trailer, in Santa Rosa next to the county's planning and building department, Permit Sonoma, was set up to accelerate the application process for homeowners in unincorporated Sonoma County needing to repair or rebuild.

The center is currently meeting its goal of returning comments on completed applications within three to five business days, with a 35 percent to 40 percent reduction in fees, according to Maggie Fleming, a Permit Sonoma spokeswoman. "And for less complex projects, we will return comments within three days or further expedite with over the counter, same day approval."

By late May, Permit Sonoma had issued about 150 home rebuilding permits.

In Sonoma Valley, permitted projects included only nine residences in Glen Ellen, four in Kenwood, one on Lovall Valley Road and one on Castle Road. Six others were partway through the process, according to county officials. Permits also have been issued for two guesthouses in Glen Ellen and one in Kenwood. Because Sonoma Valley was among the last areas to be completely cleared of debris in the government cleanup, permit applications are expected to ramp up in the coming months, officials said.

Nicholson is still plowing through paperwork for her rebuild, but she said that she is satisfied with the process so far. She accepts that the wider effort is complex, and inevitably a slow one.

Asked when she expects to be fully moved into her new house, Nicholson gave a knowing answer. "I'm hoping for Christmas," she said. Then she burst out laughing.