

[Returning residents grapple with overgrown abandoned neighboring properties](#)

Enterprise-Record

Some solutions are emerging, but funds are short

PARADISE — Abandoned properties overgrown with flammable vegetation vastly out-number new homes under construction in the burn scar, and there's little cash-strapped local officials can really do.

The fire risk caused by overgrown empty lots is putting the long-term sustainability and safety of the community at stake as it enters fully into recovery.

But nearly 19 months later, a handful of piecemeal solutions are also increasingly emerging, born of the community's resolve to avoid past mistakes.

For example, local developers are discussing setting up a community land trust, maintaining a string of protective parks, and consolidating properties.

Charles Brooks, the director of the Rebuild Paradise Foundation, said he views the challenge as an opportunity for solidarity. Like many other "good neighbors," he's taken to weeding some of the lots near his home, which is under construction. He's hoping the work can help convince insurance companies to keep his insurance within an affordable range, too.

But he hasn't been able to get in touch with all his neighbors.

"I would just hope that people take the necessary responsibility for the property that they own and the effects that that could have on their neighborhood and community that they may not be returning to," he said.

He's part of a new group trying to offer people another option. The Paradise Ridge Community Land

Group Fund, which was formalized earlier this year and had its “soft launch” in May, lets those who’ve moved on relinquish ownership so the land can be used for affordable housing or parks that can double as buffer zones.

“We want to take that land and put it to use in the best way possible that aligns with the community’s goals and helps the rebuild,” explained Seana O’Shaughnessy, the president and CEO of the Community Housing Improvement Program.

The new fund is held by the North Valley Community Foundation and run by CHIP, Habitat for Humanity of Butte County and the Rebuild Paradise Foundation. It can now accept tax-deductible donations of parcels whose owners might be looking to get out of their maintenance responsibilities. The groups have committed some funds to be able to keep the donated land clear and are fund-raising for more.

“I know people are still deciding, so there’s no pressure,” O’Shaughnessy said. “We’re here.”

Brooks said his role in the partnership is to help determine the best use for each donated property.

“We’re considering the public good,” he explained. “There are going to be areas of town and of the ridge that are really going to be useful for fire mitigation efforts, as well as additional evacuation routes and safety zones.”

Already, some preliminary research suggests that strategically-located parks in the town could be effective in reducing the spread of a fire as well as the overall loss of structures.

The research was conducted by the Paradise Recreation and Parks District and the Nature Conservancy. Dan Efseaff, the district manager, said that the group modeled a wildfire nearly identical to the Camp Fire, but with a string of open spaces on the eastern side of town. The results showed a “significant risk reduction,” he said. He expected to be able to release a full report within the next couple months.

He has had conversations with community members interested in donating or selling their property to his agency. He speaks dreamily of a future Paradise with a protective belt of managed land, including orchards, parks and grazing land.

The rub, though, is getting the funds to make it happen — particularly in a pandemic. For now, he’s

waiting on final confirmation on a federal grant within the next two months to purchase two properties near existing parks. It's a beginning, he said.

Uncertain return

Firefighters have warned repeatedly about the risk caused by the empty lots, even passing additional rules for the town of Paradise, but they have limited capacity to enforce them. Also, abatement, though it is an option, is expensive to local governments.

Cal Fire has sent out information about requirements to clear defensible space around structures to all property owners. It's unclear how many have even received the flyers, let alone actively taking steps to remove brush.

For comparison, around 32 percent of the property owners mandated to sign up for some sort of tree removal by Butte County have yet to respond, more than six months after it was first advertised. There are 17,100 parcels in the program, which encompasses the entire Camp Fire footprint.

Less than one third of property owners who responded to a United Policyholders survey one year after the fire said they had decided to rebuild.

As of this week, 213 homes have been rebuilt. Combined, the county and the town have received 1,311 permits to rebuild in the burn scar. The town celebrated its 1,000th building permit application this week.

Slightly more than 3,000 residential structures survived the fire, according to Cal Fire damage data. Around 14,000 were destroyed.

Consolidating land

Doug Teeter, the Butte County Supervisor representing much of the burn scar, is taking no chances with his own home.

The importance of defensible space is seared into his mind. When he was fleeing the fire, he took refuge in an open field. Flames were taking down a garage around 100 feet away, but didn't reach him. So, he decided he wanted to make sure he could clear at least 100 feet around his home himself when he

rebuilt.

“It’s such a big investment to not have control,” he said. “It just seems like you’re asking for another disaster.”

He decided to buy out his neighbors’ parcels. He’s not the only one; consolidation has been an attractive option for those with the resources and concerned about the many abandoned properties around their rebuild.

In Teeter’s case, most of the neighbors whose lots he bought were relatives who decided to move on. The small neighborhood, where Teeter grew up himself and which his grandfather had built, sits at the top of Dry Creek Drainage. Now, much of Teeter’s five consolidated lots are bare, logged of dead trees and brush.

Nearby, scotch broom is taking over a neighbor’s property.

Teeter’s home will be 100 feet away. He’s drawing the plans himself, and writing in a 5-foot buffer zone where there will be no flammable material whatsoever as well as the 30-foot and 100-foot buffer zones required by Cal Fire.

The house will be all concrete and metal — materials resistant to flames.