

Safe Houses - Rebuilding in fire zones requires new thinking

North Bay Bohemian

Tragic losses from the October firestorms are still very fresh in our hearts and minds. Discussions about how to rebuild are difficult and sensitive. Dan Wade of United Policyholders says, "Rebuilding in a fire ecology can present unique challenges in the insurance process. Knowing how to maximize insurance benefits can help ensure that homeowners are able to rebuild with fire-resistant materials and continue to be insurable."

There is a growing understanding that many homes in California were built in "fire ecology areas," zones where periodic wildfire is a natural part of the ecosystem. In the 1970s, Ray Krauss worked as an environmental planner contributing to early drafts of Sonoma County's first general plan, which, informed by research about the 1964 Hanley fire, proposed limiting development in high-risk fire hazard zones. A political backlash stifled that proposal. "If there had been acceptance of the county's early environmental planning, many current losses could have been avoided," says Krauss.

Recognizing fire ecology, how do we ensure responsible planning so community members aren't put in harm's way? When disaster strikes, how will we assist those who want to rebuild safely? To address such questions, several groups are co-organizing a series of events called Conversations Around the Fire. Over a hundred people turned out for the first event about the increasing difficulties faced by renters and those without homes.

For the second gathering, Santa Rosa Councilmember Julie Combs will be joined by Wade and Krauss to talk about "Rebuilding in a Fire Ecology." Other speakers include Laura Neish of 350 Sonoma County on support for fire victims for rebuilding green, ethnobotanist Edward Willie on permaculture and native-land-management practices, and Teri Shore of the Greenbelt Alliance on ideal locations for new housing. Conversations Around the Fire: Rebuilding in a Fire Ecology will take place on Jan. 22, from 6pm to 8pm, at Christ Church United Methodist, 1717 Yulupa Ave., Santa Rosa. There will be information about fire-resistant and eco-building materials, zero-net energy homes, affordable housing, cleanup standards, resource management and efforts for a resilient recovery with the big picture of climate change in mind.

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