

[South county community members hear about Valley fire recovery process at Thursday meeting](#)

Lake County News

MIDDLETOWN, Calif. – Hundreds of south county community members came out to Middletown High School on Thursday evening to learn about services and assistance available to help them through the process of recovering from the Valley fire.

The fire, which began Sept. 12, is the third most damaging fire in California’s history.

To date it has burned more than 76,000 acres and 1,250 homes, claimed four lives and left a reported 3,000 people homeless, officials reported.

The county of Lake hosted the nearly 70-minute meeting with support from Calpine, and many agencies and organizations – including United Policyholders and North Coast Builders Exchange – that sent representatives to answer questions from community members.

Supervisor Rob Brown said the goal was to let the community know what the recovery process was going to look like.

Referring to the normal process of building and dealing with permits, “This is not going to look anything like that,” said Brown, noting that there are many policies with regard to the recovery that they are still working to finish.

“Winter’s coming. We’ve got a lot of work to do, a lot of cleanup to do, and a lot of erosion control to accomplish before winter sets in,” Brown said, explaining that rebuilding may not happen right away.

Sue Piper, a United Policyholders board member, said the nonprofit consumer advocacy group was founded after the 1991 Oakland Hills fire – which she survived. They have a presence at the Local Assistance Center at the Middletown Senior Center, 21256 Washington St., this week.

“I’m here to tell you that there is light at the end of the tunnel, even though right now it doesn’t seem so,” Piper said.

She assured those impacted by the fire that they are not alone, that they have many people prepared to

help them.

Keith Woods, North Coast Builders Exchange's chief executive officer, said they are there as a resource when people are ready to rebuild.

He said that on Oct. 1 they are launching a Web site, www.rebuildinglakecounty.com, which will list all the licensed contractors and those offering services who can help community members in the rebuilding process.

Community Development Director Rick Coel said the county is developing a south county permit center which will be located in Hidden Valley Lake.

The county also is contracting with a company for plan and permit checking so when building permit applications start to ramp up in the spring they will be ready. Coel said the county also will work to streamline the permitting process and work with other agencies to get permit approval.

Regarding the cleanup process, Coel said that in most situations it won't be an option for people to live in RVs on their properties while rebuilding due to hazardous materials and hazardous trees, as well as the small size of some of the lots.

He said the county is looking at places where they can set up temporary RV sites for people to stay while keeping the parcels clear for cleanup.

Coel emphasized the need to conduct cleanup properly and to not spread the ash and other burned materials around.

He said the county is encouraging people to fill out right-of-entry permits, which serve as demolition permits and allow state officials to go in and clean up the properties.

One of the most encouraging moments of the night came from the state official who will oversee the massive debris removal effort to be carried out by the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, or CalRecycle.

Todd Thalhamer is the senior waste management engineer who in 2007 created CalRecycle's debris removal program, which has removed hazardous waste from fires around the state including the Angora fire of 2007 and the Boles fire that destroyed much of the city of Weed last year.

The program also has been part of the cleanup effort for the Rocky and Jerusalem fires, he said.

For Thalhamer, the road ahead for Middletown has great significance - he grew up there and is a graduate of Middletown High School. He said he played football on the field where the meeting took place on Thursday evening.

"I'm going to tell you, there's hope coming," Thalhamer said, his voice breaking as he spoke to the hundreds of residents sitting in the bleachers.

Thalhamer said residents have options in the cleanup: they can either do it themselves and follow state-mandated standards, or they can sign right-of-entry agreements with CalRecycle, which will then conduct the cleanup.

For those without insurance, the cleanup will be at no cost, he said. For those with insurance, it will cost what their policies will cover.

The debris removal process will start with the schools, and work out from there. Thalhamer said he is going to ask adjacent property owners to sign agreements immediately in order to get the cleanup process under way.

Thalhamer said homes built before 1980 are likely to contain asbestos, which is one of the hazardous materials his teams can remove safely.

He said he plans to drop 10 crews in Middletown next week to start the cleanup process, eventually increasing that number to 20 and then to 40.

At the same time, Thalhamer said he's got four other debris removal projects going elsewhere in the state.

"I ask for patience, I ask for commitment," he said, promising to bring everything he had to the effort. The cleanup starts first with population centers, he said, then moves to areas of environmental concerns, such as along creeks.

Thalhamer said his goal - which he acknowledged is a big one - is to get all of the ash and debris from the Valley fire cleared from the impacted areas by Christmas.

As part of the cleanup, he'll be training hundreds of local workers and contractors to do debris removal the right way, with safety a priority.

He also lauded Pacific Gas and Electric for doing a "phenomenal job" in rebuilding utility infrastructure. Lake County has had three major fires in a row. "Nobody has ever had that happen," he said.

Thalhamer said the debris cleanup process is thorough. Teams will dig down deep into the soil, removing all layers of ash, and taking out even the concrete footings, leaving a depression in the ground that likely will need to be replaced with clean soil.

That will be followed by soil testing, removing hazardous trees and implementing erosion control, Thalhamer said.

He asked that community members report the presence of underground tanks and any old military ordnance that might be present at home locations.

"It has been a little tough when you see this much destruction from where you've lived. But you know what? It's called 'Middletown Strong' and I'm proud to be right here," he said, wiping his eyes.

He said a hazardous materials sweep is going to move through the community first, with the cleanup process to follow.

Community members also heard about the utility repairs that have been taking place around the south county.

Preston Dickinson of AT&T said the company has 60 technicians going street to street, with more on the way in from all over Northern California.

Dickinson said 200,000 feet of cable and 360 poles have been replaced so far. In some areas, they also are replacing copper with fiber-optic line.

He said an AT&T hotline is available from 6:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 877-920-0362. In addition, AT&T has a presence at the Local Assistance Center at the Middletown Senior Center.

They're making available call forwarding, waiving the install fee for that service and offering a free month of the service, Dickinson said.

Carl Schoenhofer, PG&E senior division manager, said the first priority for the company has been to safely restore power, and that it plans to maintain a strong presence throughout the recovery.

The PG&E force on the ground includes 1,000 people, he said. There were 7,000 customers without power after the fire occurred, a number that has dropped to 2,000, Schoenhofer said.

PG&E crews have replaced 700 poles and installed 100 miles of new electrical lines.

"We still have work to do but we'll see it through to the end," Schoenhofer said.

Officials from the California Office of Emergency Services, Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Small Business Administration also were on hand to encourage people to register for assistance.

To apply, call 1-800-621-3362; those with a speech disability or hearing loss and use TTY should call 1-800-462-7585 directly; for those who use 711 or Video Relay Service, call 1-800-621-3362); apply online at www.DisasterAssistance.gov or via smartphone at m.fema.gov.

To apply for SBA assistance, call 800-659-2955. Applications for assistance must be made within 60 days of an emergency declaration; in this case, by Nov. 23.

A variety of very low interest loans are available for businesses, nonprofits and individuals. Once approved, funds often are disbursed within 18 to 21 days.

In other news, Brown said there will be a job fair from 2:30 to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 30, at Kelseyville High School.