

Waldo Canyon, Black Forest fire victims see dissimilar outcomes

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It was the worst of fires – and then came another one even worse. It was a fire in a subdivision and then it was one in a wooded, rural community. It was a fire of quick rebuilding and then it was one where the landscape won't return for a generation.

The month of June marks the anniversaries of the state's two most destructive wildfires. The Waldo Canyon and Black Forest fires happened about a year apart in the same county, each killing two people and destroying hundreds of homes. That's about where the similarities end.

Two places

The differences between the Black Forest and Waldo Canyon fire burn areas are obvious.

While the Waldo Canyon fire burned thousands of acres of forest land, the damage to homes was contained to the Mountain Shadows suburban neighborhood in northwest Colorado Springs. In Mountain Shadows, moms now push jogging strollers and dads pull toddlers in trailers behind their bikes along the paved roads. The small lawns are well-trimmed green carpets surrounding the homes and the newer, shorter, trees are staked in place.

Before and after the Waldo Canyon Fire

The few empty lots left are relatively clean, flattened dirt plots with no signs of the ash pits that were there after the fire. The rebuilt homes are stuccoed, modern buildings, each with a distinct look and feel. They stand out from the unburned homes of their neighbors that tend to have a more uniform design reflecting the late '80s and early '90s when most were constructed.

Paulett Wentworth has one of these news homes in the Parkside neighborhood, where 141 of the community's 178 homes burned. On June 26, 2012, Wentworth only had time to grab her cat and a few clothes before she rushed to safety. Nothing but rubble was left when she returned, but she vowed to rebuild as soon as possible. On a recent sunny day, she sat on her porch with her 90-year-old mother as the pair tried to see the Air Force Thunderbirds training for the upcoming Air Force Academy graduation. Most of the homes on her block of Majestic Drive have been rebuilt, though there still was noise from a

nearby construction crew and the smell of diesel from their vehicles.

"In some ways, things are better now," Wentworth said. "I think it's made more people aware of coming together as neighbors to do things. Some people complain because the neighborhood doesn't look identical to what it was. Why would we want it to look identical? We all have better houses now."

Her home has a similar layout to what the previous one had, but she changed the things she didn't like and everything in it is brand new. For the most part she said she has moved on, though she won't light a candle in her home because she hates the smell of smoke.

"Of course it wasn't worth it. You would never choose something like that to happen to you," she said. "But you find your things don't mean what they once did. Your life goes on without your stuff. It should anyways."

In Black Forest, the lots average 5 acres and tractors are more common than jogging strollers. The roads are primarily dirt and vary from smooth to barely passable, depending on the rain and whether it's a privately owned road or maintained by the county.

Evidence of the fire is everywhere. Some lots haven't been cleared of the charred, crumbling debris of homes. A basketball hoop, half burned, remains nailed to a tree. There are some new homes that resemble mansions, and also families that haven't rebuilt and are living in camping trailers (officials estimated there are about 20 of these families). Perhaps though, the most obvious sign of the fire here are the trees: thousands of acres of burned, gnarled black fingers twisting to the sky.

Residents have handled the trees in various ways. Some lots have acres of blackened stumps and other homeowners have hired crews to cut the stumps down into the ground, leaving just sawdust as evidence of their existence. Logs and sticks are piled high all over the place, waiting their turn for a volunteer chipping crew. Most of the burned trees, though, are standing and are increasingly likely to tumble over as time passes, loosening the soil beneath their dead roots and adding to the erosion problem.

Take Bluebell Lane, a narrow one-lane private road where Jim Taylor lives with his wife and 96-year-old mother. He used his tractor to carve out two channels to direct the rain rushing down the hill behind their new house. One of the channels, about a yard deep and a yard wide, passes about five feet from the base of his brand new deck.

Taylor was four years old when his family moved to this 5-acre lot. He grew up surrounded by the trees and the silence and immediately wanted to rebuild when the house burned. To save time and money, the home is a pre-built modular home atop a concrete foundation and walk-out basement. The insurance money didn't go far enough though. He's left with acres of burned trees with little money to remove them or deal with an erosion problem that threatens his house and all of the properties and roads downhill from him.

On a recent day, the normally quiet property is booming with the sound of the Air Force Thunderbirds flying overhead and the buzzing of chainsaws. A crew volunteering for Black Forest Together, a non-profit organization working to rebuild the community, is cutting down the dead trees behind Taylor's house and lining them up to help slow the rushing water. The logs won't stop the water but should slow it and help with erosion.

The crew is doing the work in one day that would take Taylor months to complete.

"Hear that? That's a great sound," Taylor says of the chainsaws. "That's progress."

Still, there's something bittersweet to him about seeing all of those trees come down.

"I'd rather have the house burn than the trees," he said. "I'll never in my lifetime see the trees like they were."

Two recoveries

There's no question that the Mountain Shadows recovery has been easier and faster than that in Black Forest.

After 23 months, about 57 percent of the homes destroyed in Black Forest were rebuilt, according to Pikes Peak Regional Building records. In that same amount of time, 77 percent of the Mountain Shadows homes were rebuilt.

"This disaster is not finished," said Edward Bracken, chairman of Black Forest Together. "It has fallen off the radar but it will take 20 to 25 years to recover."

Part of the problem, he said, is that many people aren't sure if they want to rebuild.

"This is an urban community in a forested area," Bracken said. "When people bought homes many years ago, they bought them for the trees. When you lose them, when all you see are 20 acres of black sticks, there's a lot of different ideas about what you should do."

Lovell, from Pikes Peak Regional Building, said that Black Forest residents might be hesitant to rebuild because they know their neighborhood can never be the same. That wasn't the case with Mountain Shadows.

"I think Waldo Canyon people came out of the gate faster probably because their home was their property. In Black Forest, their home was just part of their property," he said. "If you get in a wreck and you crash your car, you can just say you'll get another car. But if it was your dream car, a 67' Camaro and that got crashed, you couldn't buy a new one. I think that's what some people in Black Forest are dealing with."

Money is another holdup to the Black Forest recovery. The Federal Emergency Management Agency estimates that 95 percent of the homeowners who lost their homes in the Black Forest fire had homeowner's insurance. But most of the policies don't cover the cost of the removal of the dead trees on

their properties.

Those kind of homeowners' policies aren't even available, said Carole Walker, executive director of the Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association.

"Policies will give a certain amount for landscaping, but with a wildfire in those communities where they have acres of trees, that's not something homeowner's insurance would cover," she said. "Imagine how cost-prohibitive insurance would be if insurance covered the replacement and removal of the trees.

Homeowner's insurance provides a set amount that would cover normal landscaping, like the lots in the Waldo Canyon fire."

The tree problem is just part of it, said Kerri Olivier, a recovery coordinator for United Policy Holders, a nonprofit organization that advocates for the rights of insurance-policy holders. Many of the Black Forest residents didn't update their policies when they added buildings or they didn't separately insure the businesses that many ran out of their homes, she said.

"In Black Forest, you saw a lot more under-insurance for things like other structures," Olivier said. "Many people had a separate workshop or building that wasn't written up on their policy. and they all were under-insured for landscaping."

Property- value wise, the recovery for Mountain Shadows has been easier than Black Forest, said Steve Schleiker, El Paso County Assessor.

After the Waldo Canyon fire, the assessor's office thought there would be a stigma on the neighborhood and no one would want to live there because a wildfire had come through.

"Over time, we started seeing sales and realized that didn't happen," Schleiker said. "It was a complete surprise to us. The values maintained and now there's absolutely no stigma on that neighborhood at all." From 2014 to 2015 the average property value in Mountain Shadows increased between 6 percent and 9 percent, Schleiker said. That's about on par with the county average.

So far, it's hard to tell what will happen in Black Forest. Many of the homes and lots sold since the fire have gone for less than they were worth, primarily because new homeowners agreed to take on the problems of the dead trees or erosion. When his office recently reassessed all properties in El Paso County, it assessed lots that still had their living trees at 30 percent more than lots without trees.

"We had to take trees into account. They have value, especially out there," he said.

Looking forward

Bracken doesn't think Black Forest will ever look like it once did. Many of the trees will be gone and some owners probably won't ever rebuild.

To bring it even close to where it was, Black Forest Together and other organizations helping out need more volunteers to help chip trees and work on flood mitigation projects. They need donations and grants

for the tools and supplies for these projects. Insurance isn't covering the biggest problems and they need a lot of help and probably for a long time, Bracken said.

"Our goal is that 25 years from now, the fire danger in this area will be less than it ever was," he said.

A lot of work will come down to the Black Forest homeowners, who have proven thus far to be pretty independent. Of the 279 Black Forest homes that have been rebuilt, or are permitted to be rebuilt, Pikes Peak Regional Building lists 48 properties where the homeowner is the primary contractor – six times as many homeowner contractors as Waldo Canyon fire properties.

Carolyn Brown is one of those independent Black Forest types. While she hired a contractor to build her home, she took it upon herself to re-build 1,200 feet of fence on her property and, thus far, cut down 100 of the dead trees. She has about 100 to go. Not bad for a 120-pound 72-year-old woman.

"I could hire someone, but then what would I do all day," she said. "When you are raised on a farm, you learn to do everything by yourself. Hiring someone to do something you can do doesn't occur to me."

She tried hiring someone to put up the fence, but she soon tired of arguing when it wasn't being constructed to her specifications.

"I finally said 'Stop. I will do the fence myself.' If I'm going to be picky, I'm going to be picky with myself," she said. "It's sort of therapeutic. You go out with your circular saw and nails and you screw it together. Others may call it crazy, but I call it therapeutic."

Even when the work is done, the psychological scars of the fire will remain in Black Forest, just as they remain in Mountain Shadows. There, most of the physical work is done, but residents say the neighborhood isn't quite the same.

On Courtney Drive almost every home on the street was destroyed by the Waldo Canyon fire. The picturesque street next to the Flying W Ranch was once decimated to blackened rubble and now almost every home is new, modern and distinct from its neighbors. Just three empty lots remain.

The foothills behind the street are covered with trees turned to black sticks, but that's about the only sign of the wildfire.

The remaining signs of the wildfire on Courtney Drive aren't visual, said Jonni McCoy, one of the first to move back on the street.

"All of us went through trauma and a lot of us had some form of PTSD," she said. "Some of us recognized that and some of us didn't. Some of us aren't functioning."

She vows to never use the word "normal" again. To her, things will never be more normal and, at best, they will be closer to normal.

"Most people think you get your house back and your stuff replaced and you'll be fine," she said. "That's not true. We're forever different."