



## FIRE VICTIM REBUILD CONCEPTUAL POLICY

On December 18, 2007 fire marshals from the County of San Diego and from fire districts affected by the recent wildfires met. Represented were the County of San Diego's Department of Planning and Land Use (DPLU), Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District, North County Fire Protection District, Ramona MWD, and Rincon Del Diablo MWD. The San Diego Rural Fire Protection District and the Ramona Municipal Water District have requested the County of San Diego act as their representative for fire rebuild plan checks.

The fire marshals met specifically to discuss fire code and code compliance issues for fire victim rebuilds. The objective was to reach consensus on how to handle some of the difficult code compliance issues we will all face as we strive to reduce structural losses when the next fire occurs. This will require flexibility on the part of all concerned. We know the contributing factors for most of the destruction and we know the steps necessary to reduce these losses.

Clearly, codes have changed since most of the buildings destroyed were constructed. All new buildings will meet current codes including ignition-resistant construction. Residential fire sprinkler systems will be per the Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ), but it is safe to assume most of the rebuilds will require them.

The most difficult issues will be access and water supplies. There are a wide variety of existing circumstances, and some minor code differences, among the areas represented. However, the code does require a water supply for fire emergencies. There can be no single answer other than a water supply will be required. In some cases acceptable hydrants already exist. In some cases water tanks exist, but may be undersized. The AHJ will evaluate each circumstance and make a decision. They will have the option of accepting the existing water supply or requiring improvements.

Access will be the most difficult problem to solve. Many of the structures destroyed do not have adequate access. In fact, difficult access was a contributing factor to the loss of some of these structures. After discussion it was agreed there is no universal answer. In some cases bringing the access up to code will be a simple matter; in others it would be literally impossible. Each case will be considered individually.

Some concerns include:

**WIDTH:** Where narrow access can be improved, it should. Where improvement is not possible for the entire distance we need to consider accepting the best that can reasonably be done. Partial widening and/or providing turn-outs are several of the possibilities to consider.

**LENGTH/TURN-AROUNDS:** While the code calls for turnarounds when driveway access exceeds 150' it is recognized that topography may make it impossible. Solutions might be to place a turn-around a bit farther from the structure than desired, to alter the dimensions of the



turnaround area or to provide turnouts along the access to allow fire apparatus and other vehicles to pass by each other.

**GRADE:** Existing road grade will be a real challenge and it is likely most grades will be very difficult, if not impossible, to change. Again, some mitigation may be possible such as increased width or turnouts, but that will be up to each AHJ.

**SURFACE:** Paving is required in all of the fire and water districts affected. The County of San Diego has agreed to do the plan checks for San Diego Rural Fire Protection District and the Ramona Municipal Water District fire victims. They will be held to the paving requirements. Any variation from the paving requirement will be at the discretion of the AHJ. In the unserved County of San Diego areas outside of one of these districts paving is required when the grade reaches 10%.

**EASEMENTS/STREET NUMBERS:** A substantial number of homes lacking street signage and/or visible street addresses were encountered during the fires. Some calls for help went unanswered, or had serious delay, because street signs and property addresses did not exist. Fire code requirements for posting of street names and addresses will be applied to rebuilt structures. Unnamed easements will be scrutinized and owners may be required to name them and post signs.

**LOCATION ON PROPERTY:** Top of slope and close proximity to property line (under 30') were contributors to structure loss in the fires. The AHJ will evaluate these cases and may require relocation, especially for those wishing to change the pre-fire footprint and/or increase the building size.

**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT:** Lack of adequate vegetation management has always been a contributing factor in the destruction of structures. While an increased number of homes with good fuel management were noticeable in this latest siege of fires, also noticeable was the lack of fuel management that contributed to the structural losses. The AHJ's will evaluate each new structure – the topography, location vs. slope, adjacent combustible vegetation—and apply the appropriate vegetation management requirements. In the State Responsibility Areas (SRA's), the fuel modification distance has increased to 100'.

**SUMMARY:** We have two common goals. The first is to help people get back into their homes; the second is to improve on their safety. It would not be reasonable to apply the full force of the code nor would it be reasonable to do nothing. The AHJ's agree to work with homeowners to seek solutions and/or mitigation measures to avoid or reduce a repetition of structural and potentially human losses. Our commitment is to seek solutions, be flexible and work for improvement. There is no one answer to the problems we face. There will be more flexibility for those rebuilding the same size structure than for those choosing to increase in size. These benefits shall be owner and property specific.



**PARTICIPANTS**

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