

Rebuilding Sonoma County: 2019 holds challenges, opportunities for Mark West

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Special coverage

This story is part of a monthly series in 2019 chronicling the rebuilding efforts in Sonoma County's four fire zones: Coffey Park, Fountaingrove, the greater Mark West area and Sonoma Valley. Read all of the Rebuild North Bay coverage [here](#).

Mike Holdner is looking forward to the simple things this year: the prospect of planting a garden in his backyard, barbecues with his neighbors and hearing trick-or-treaters knock on the door of his Mark West Estates home.

Holdner, whose Pacific Heights Drive house was destroyed in the October 2017 firestorm, has spent the past 15 months as a de facto community leader, diligently attending block captain meetings and meticulously organizing the rebuild of 78 homes in his neighborhood.

His own two-story house is part of a group rebuild by Stonefield Companies and he expects to move in with his family in April. By his count, 142 of the 178 homes leveled by the Tubbs fire in Mark West Estates are in the rebuilding pipeline — a sign of hope.

"I'm looking forward to getting in, to living next to neighbors and having it look like a neighborhood again," he said. "I want to get back to regular life, not this route we took on Oct. 9. ... Let's get the neighborhood back, not a construction zone, not a war zone. A neighborhood."

With the dawn of the new year, Holdner and some others rebuilding in the greater Mark West area are planning to close a chapter of living in

rental homes and daily dealings with construction crews and contractors. Attention will turn to challenges like ensuring streets are repaved, sidewalks repaired, trees are planted and disaster preparedness efforts are continued in newly rebuilt neighborhoods.

But, some fire survivors are still struggling to unravel complex insurance issues and others are facing hard decisions about rebuilding when their coverage for alternate living expenses runs out this year. The availability of construction materials could pose a challenge in the rebuilding process, signs already apparent in the rebuild of Larkfield Estates, block captain Brad Sherwood said.

Slower progress in hilly areas

In Knights Valley and Franz Valley, hilly areas where group rebuilds were not embraced to replace the 65 homes that were destroyed, progress is slower, said block captain Scott Newman. Many, like Augie Grube, are choosing to rebuild with manufactured homes.

Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore, who represents the region, said the next 11 months hold promises and challenges. The holidays were the “first time in 15 months people really took a breath,” he said. The new year is a “time to be intentional,” and focused on continued recovery and resilience, he said.

“I’ll be damned if we’re going to take our foot off the gas,” he said.

In the greater Mark West area, which extends east to Knights Valley, more than 40 homes have been completed and 413 are under construction, according to county data.

Fairfield-based Silvermark Construction Services has completed 15 homes in the region and is rebuilding 41 others, said David Hosking, vice president of operations. The turn of the year brought an increased number of calls about prospective rebuilds, he said.

“The phones are ringing and people are starting to make decisions and starting to see the deadline coming up on their alternative living expenses,” Hosking said. “It’s picking up with the amount of people saying they need to get started.”

In Berry Brook, a 43-home subdivision where the first rebuilt home in unincorporated Sonoma County was completed last year, block captain Audrey Volkin sees 2019 as a year to refocus on issues like rebuilding walls, landscaping and reconfiguring homeowners' association dues. Her home on Willow Green Place will be complete this March, and she said she's confronting a surge of emotions about settling into her rebuilt home.

"There's a lot of anticipation and excitement about being back in the neighborhood and also a little bit of anxiety and wondering what it's going to be like living in this place again," she said.

Sewer project extension proposed

The Board of Supervisors on Feb. 5 will consider approving an extension of a sewer project into a section of Larkfield, in addition to considering signing off on a financing program that will allow property owners to finance construction costs and connection fees. Residents can choose to hook up to the sewer in the voluntary program, which allows property owners to potentially expand their housing projects or build granny units without worries about capacity or aging septic systems, said Sherwood, a Sonoma Water spokesman. A meeting to update residents the project, review the financing program and allow property owners to choose to participate will be held Feb. 28, he said.

"It's a total game-changer for the community in terms of rebuilding and resilience," Sherwood said.

Though forward motion will continue with the rebuilding effort this year, scars remain from the firestorm, Holdner said.

"For some of the people who move back in, it's going to be very emotional," he said. "Some people will have a hard time living in that neighborhood after the fire once all the business is done and the details are done. ... Some people will still struggle, especially on that windy day in the fall."

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