

NEWS

From the County of San Bernardino
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Nov. 6, 2007

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More than \$1.7 million in fee waivers approved for victims

Victims of the Grass Valley and Slide fires will receive a significant amount of help from the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors as they rebuild their homes and their lives.

The Board of Supervisors today approved a \$1,781,560 plan to waive rebuilding-related fees for people whose homes were damaged or destroyed by the recent wildfires. The effort is consistent with the measures taken following the Old and Grand Prix fires in 2003.

"Most of us can only imagine what it would be like to lose our homes to such a devastating disaster," said Supervisor Dennis Hansberger, whose Third District includes the areas in which homes were lost to the fires. "Waiving these fees is the least we can do for these people who have lost so much."

The wind-driven fires, which started on Oct. 22, burned more than 14,000 acres and damaged or destroyed about 520 homes and other structures in and near the communities of Grass Valley, Green Valley Lake, and Running Springs. The Assessor estimates rebuilding costs at \$155.7 million.

The board's action set aside \$1,781,560 in contingency funds to cover all fees related to the rebuilding of fire-damaged homes, including fees for demolition, temporary use permits, plan review, and construction permits. The fees will be waived only for the square footage damaged or destroyed. Residents building larger homes will pay fees for the additional square footage.

The board also voted to waive Fire Department planning and engineering fees related to the rebuilding effort as well as sewer permit and inspection fees and sewer user fees.

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The waivers can only be claimed by the owners of the property at the time of the fire. And if the owner decides to build in another location, the new location must be in an unincorporated area of the county to qualify for the fee waiver.

The board also authorized the county Solid Waste Management Division to develop a formal process for selecting a contractor to remove and dispose of debris from the Grass Valley and Slide fires.

The debris removal plan will be consistent with a program outlined by Lieutenant Governor John Garamendi during a meeting with county officials on Nov. 1. Garamendi organized the meeting, which included officials from the Lake Tahoe area who shared strategies successfully employed during the cleanup following fires in the Lake Tahoe area.

"A consolidated and coordinated cleanup effort will expedite the recovery process so mountain residents can concentrate on rebuilding their homes and their lives," Board of Supervisors Chairman Paul Biane said.

The county took a leadership role in addressing the needs of victims after the blazes broke out. The county Sheriff's Department and County Fire Department conducted an orderly and successful evacuation. County Human Services led a donation effort to augment the efforts of the American Red Cross. And the County Administrative Office created the Fire Emergency Local Assistance Center, or FELAC – a one-stop site adjacent to the evacuation center hosting more than 40 county, state, federal, and private agencies serving the needs of fire victims.

"Now that the fires are not threatening our mountain communities, the county can focus on cleanup and rebuilding efforts," Biane said. "As winter approaches, it's also critical for the county to mitigate the potential for flooding and debris flows in burned areas and to warn the public about possible post-fire hazards."