

A number of Berry Creek residents—including several more than are pictured here—met with the CN&R to discuss obstacles they've faced in rebuilding from the North Complex Fire.

Facebook group Bald Rock Talk, where people meet virtually to share resources and their fire recovery experiences. Before the fire, Flanagin worked as a cashier at Village Market, and she helped arrange the parking lot meeting of survivors and the CN&R.

Running up to that meeting, Flanagin posted an informal poll to that group that asked, simply, "How are you feeling today?" She offered a dozen or so possible responses, both negative and positive. The most frequently chosen, each roughly 50 times, were "Still in the area with unstable living situation," "mentally unwell" and "confused."

### Money and permits

Only a handful of homeowners in the area have begun rebuilding, and none of the residents who met at the ruins of the Village Market planned to start anytime soon. At least one woman said she had given up hope of ever rebuilding in the area, and none expected to break ground until at least 2023.

That's because rebuilding is a complicated, costly and time-consuming process involving numerous county, state and federal government agencies—ranging from at least two different Butte County departments (Planning and Environmental Health) to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Additionally, those looking to rebuild often have to coordinate with Cal Fire and/or PG&E at various steps along the way.

"It just seems like with each step, someone has their hands in your pockets," one woman said.

For many, the process begins with a state-issued Right-of-Entry permit, which enables property owners to avail of state and FEMA programs that can help with debris cleanup. With the state backlogged due to years of disastrous fires, even this first step can take months. Debris cleanup is a two-phase process (one for toxic chemicals, another for debris), and the removal of hazardous trees is yet another step.

After those things are accomplished, staying on a property burnt by fire requires residents to pay nearly \$700 for a permit to camp on their own land ("which we've already paid our property taxes on," one woman pointed out). Residents wanting to rebuild are also responsible for the cost of having a power pole installed.

All of this needs to be accomplished before residents can even apply for costly permits to rebuild. With contractors in demand due to multiple wildfires in recent years; stricter state regulations to ensure homes are more resistant to fire; and the cost of building materials at an all-time high due to supply-chain breaks, rebuilding costs are being driven even higher.

In the meantime, most of the people still living on their land require gas-powered generators for electricity. The Berry Creek residents said that, with this summer's temperatures regularly reaching triple digits, they could easily go through five gallons or more of gas a day; they reported spending between \$600 and \$1,600 monthly on fuel.

There also are insurance issues. At least two of the Berry Creek residents said they are currently in lawsuits with their insurers over settlement amounts. Others complained that pay-outs covered only the cost of their homes, not their belongings. And some said that the cost to insure once they are in the process of rebuilding will be greatly inflated over their previous premiums.

The survivors said the most immediate help they could use is with the cost of permits, noting that grants covered many such fees for Ridge residents to rebuild after the Camp Fire, but only a handful have been available for North Complex victims.

"This community is never going to get anywhere if the county or state or somebody doesn't get involved to make it easier for people here," Flanagin said. "A lot of people up here have fairly low incomes and can't afford to get their lives back to where where they were at before the fire. As long as we're overlooked, nothing will get better."

Butte County Supervisor Bill Connelly represents District 1—which includes Berry Creek—and during a recent phone interview said he's aware of, and sympathetic to, the challenges his constituents in the area have faced in the wake of the fire. He also agreed that they've been overlooked.

"The Dixie Fire is the latest thing, and prior to that was the Camp Fire, which wiped out parts of Concow and Yankee Hill and took out 12,000 homes in Paradise," he said. "With the North Complex Fire falling between, it really is a forgotten fire. There's not as much empathy for the victims, nor is there as much money readily available to help them."

Connelly said waiving building fees or lessening them at the county level is not possible, because "the cost of government has gone up dramatically, even during my time in office." Instead, he said he—"with the full support of the rest of the Board of Supervisors"—is actively seeking grant funding to alleviate that burden.

Several of the Berry Creek residents noted that there was a series of county-run town halls and informational meetings in the wake of the Camp Fire, while only one (at the Southside Oroville Community Center, in April) was held for North Complex victims. Attendance at the meeting was sparse, which Connelly and the Berry Creek crew agreed was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Connelly said he would work on scheduling

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