

The county just finished updating its hazard mitigation plan, with input from over a dozen agencies ranging from municipalities and fire safe councils to parks districts and public utilities. In it, they outline projects that could help save people or infrastructure in the event of a disaster. Dunsmoor submitted it to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) last month and it was approved, she said, so now it goes to each of those agencies for adoption.

Thing is, not every project will be completed, nor are they required to be. So, while the county has set a priority for widening Cohasset Road, for example, the only way in and out of that community, there's no guarantee it'll happen.

"It's a wishlist," Dunsmoor said. Many of the projects laid out in the previous plan, completed every five years, were never realized, she explained. That's because they tend to be costly—widening a road or executing large-scale tree and brush removal can run into the millions.

But by including those projects in the hazard mitigation plan, they become eligible for annual grant funding, as well as for post-disaster FEMA assistance.

"We had more districts join [the plan process] because of the flooding that happened after the Oroville Dam [spillway disaster]," Dunsmoor said.

The Feather River Recreation and Park District, for instance, sustained significant damage during that flood, as did facilities owned by the South Feather Water and Power Agency and Lake Oroville Public Utility District. When the water receded, however, and entities like the city of Oroville began applying for FEMA assistance, they weren't eligible.

An albeit dull silver lining of any disaster is the ability to rebuild with more insight. For Paradise, which lost 90 percent of its real estate, that opportunity is huge. While some say the town should not rebuild on its existing footprint because of the vulnerability against future fires, Mayor Jones says new codes

and regulations will protect the community.

"Are we better prepared? We're getting ourselves there," she said. "The council adopted ordinances above and beyond wildland-urban interface standards set by the state. Couple that with our defensible space ordinance, and I think the town will be a lot safer."

Jones pointed to the destruction of the Camp Fire as an indication they're on the right path. Fifty percent of the homes built after 2008—when codes were updated to require sprinkler systems in every home, among other things—survived the fire. Only 9 percent of those built before then are still standing, she said.

"If anybody's saying that rebuilding on the same footprint might not be the right idea—they say it about rural areas, but not in big cities. Look at the Getty Fire. It's hypocritical," she said. "If you're going to say people should not live where there's risk, then there should be nobody living where there are tornadoes, nobody where there are hurricanes, nobody where there

are earthquakes. What we do is we adopt new building standards so they stand up in an earthquake. We build in a smarter, more resilient way. But it doesn't mean we can't live here."

She, Dunsmoor and Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea all emphasized personal responsibility in preparing for future disasters. Have a communication plan that doesn't rely on technology, get to know multiple routes out should a hasty evacuation be necessary, and take the proper precautions to safeguard your home, whether it be from fire or flood or power outage.

"I talked to a guy who lived in Paradise. As he was leaving [during the Camp Fire], the road was packed with traffic," Honea said. "But he knew that the bike path used to be an old railroad bed that went from Paradise to Chico. So, he drove down the bike path and got to safety. You've got to be aware and know multiple ways to get out."

The county and the town of Paradise also are working on improving their emergency alert systems. On the day of the Camp

Fire, the Butte County Sheriff's Office had one person on duty who was experienced with how to send alerts. That person sent them via CodeRED, an opt-in service, but by the time those alerts reached residents, many of them already were evacuating or in harm's way. The fire moved so swiftly, Honea said, that it knocked out cell towers and power before a lot of people were notified.

The BCSO this past summer installed high-low sirens on its vehicles that are to be used only in the case of an evacuation, Honea said. In addition, Dunsmoor said she's talked with, for instance, a group of people who do ham radio and could, with battery or generator backup, spread the word—assuming people know to tune in.

"At least the siren would say, 'Something is happening,'" she said. "We recognize we need to build out our ability to notify people with methods that aren't overly reliant on technology."

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