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A lesson from the Camp Fire

Roll back tax breaks for the rich and stop corporate giveaways

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

It has been nearly nine months since the Paradise Camp Fire, which caused at least 85 deaths, destroyed almost 20,000 building structures and wiped out nearly 240 square miles of forest and urban spaces.

Now what? What should be the new Paradise? Who should pay for the damages? How do we make sure that this does not happen again? What is happening to all the people displaced by the fire? What about the neighboring cities of Chico and Oroville?

All of these questions and more have been covered in well over a hundred stories and editorials that our sister paper, Chico News & Review, has published since the fire.

I am very proud of the work done by our Chico editor, Melissa Daugherty, and her team of reporters and freelancers. And the fire is personal for me. I moved to Chico in 1980 to become publisher of CN&R. Deborah and I were married near the Honey Run Covered Bridge that was destroyed in the Camp Fire, and we lived in Chico until 1989, when we moved to Sacramento to start SN&R.

Our Chico drivers were distributing CN&R in Paradise on the day of the fire. Two members of our staff lost their homes. We lost over 100 newsstands. CN&R, like all other Butte County businesses, would benefit from a new Paradise arising from the ashes like a phoenix.

We know that Mother Nature, with 385 million years of experience restoring trees and habitat destroyed by fire, is hard at work erecting a new ecosystem, which most likely will be different than the old one. Global warming and the intensity of the fire have made her job more difficult.

Also hard at work are the government employees, who have the

challenging task of restoring a city at the same time they do their regular jobs—providing water, running schools, bringing aid to those in need and finding housing. Their jobs are so much more difficult in the aftermath of the fire.

Many of us take government services for granted. The Butte County public servants have been extraordinary: the firefighters and law enforcement personnel who risked their lives to save others; the Butte County Social Welfare workers, many of whom lost their homes but still came in to work day after day to help those in need of housing or food; the teachers and principals whose job is tough on any day, who are now dealing with destroyed schools and children suffering trauma; and the government employees who have to ensure that Paradise residents have safe drinking water. We have written more stories about them in the last eight months than the previous 40 years of publishing in Chico. And rightly so. Affordable, safe drinking water is a basic human need.

We are lucky to have such dedicated, intelligent, caring government employees working to restore Paradise. We need to recognize how important fire safety, clean water, good schools, affordable housing, breathable air and public transportation are to our well-being, and increase the resources dedicated to these functions. We need to roll back the tax breaks given to the rich and stop the corporate giveaways that bring jobs at the expense of social services. Instead, we need to put that money to work improving our government services. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.