It’s been three years since the December 2017 Thomas Fire and resulting 1/9 Debris Flow. As we mark the third anniversary of the disasters, we will never forget the victims, as well as individuals and organizations whose resolve has made the recovery possible. The Montecito community has continued to emerge from the disasters, and its resilience has only grown stronger.

STORM PREPARATION

Vegetation growth in the burn areas has not returned to pre-fire conditions but is on track with canopy cover returned at about 85 percent, with some areas about 100 percent. This growth has reduced the risk of debris-laden flooding. Each year, the risk assessment team consisting of experts in geology, forestry, fire, public safety and meteorology review potential risks of the coming winter storm season.

The team monitors incoming storms and issues warnings as necessary. Fortunately, there has not been an evacuation due to flooding or debris flow risk since March 2019.

Community meetings to provide the latest updates have been held after each winter since 2018, with the last one held virtually on December 17, 2020.

EMERGENCY ALERTING

The ReadySBC (formerly Aware and Prepare) reverse notification system and the County’s protocols for emergency notifications to the public continues to be enhanced through policy, training and changes in technology. The County and our first responder agencies has adopted state-wide standardized terminology for evacuations.

Additionally, Spanish language notifications have been enriched through the County’s Spanish Mass Alerting Generator (a quick sheet for non-English speakers to develop Spanish messages), improvements in technology allowing for multi-language notifications, and the hiring of a Spanish-speaking Emergency Manager within the Office of Emergency Management.

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ROAD AND BRIDGE REPAIR

The disasters caused significant damages to roads, and public and private bridges. Separate from Caltrans bridge replacements and repairs, County Public Works is reconstructing more than 50 lane miles of road, drainage structures, and rehabilitated 16 bridges.

Restoring the heavily damaged infrastructure to provide safe and improved streets and roads for residents was made possible with a combination of funding sources, including about $10 million from the twin disaster settlement with Southern California Edison.

In addition to designating funds from the County’s Road Maintenance Annual Plan, Public Works received disaster support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Federal Highway Administration.

RANDALL ROAD DEBRIS BASIN AND STORM NETS

On August 28, 2018, the County Board of Supervisors authorized applying for a Hazard Mitigation grant for the creation of a new debris basin on San Ysidro Creek near Highway 192 and Randall Road. This project established a new debris basin in an area heavily impacted in the 1/9 Debris Flow. When completed, the project will also provide additional open space in the heart of the Montecito community.

The EIR for the project was approved on August 18, 2020, with an addendum to be considered by the Board on January 12, 2021.

In early- to mid-2019, the Partnership for Resilient Communities (PRC) developed and installed six debris nets along San Ysidro, Buena Vista and Cold Spring creeks. The nets are intended to capture debris and reduce the volume and intensity of debris flows in the canyons located above the community of Montecito, and are approved to remain in place through 2023 to allow sufficient time for the hillsides to revegetate.

The County worked with PRC in developing the project, and pledged a guarantee of $1 million as a performance security to ensure the nets are properly maintained and ultimately removed.

To date, debris basin acquisition and enhancement projects total more than $38 million.

For 1/9 Debris Flow recovery information, go to ReadySBC.org/rebuild
PRIVATE PROPERTY REBUILDING

Following the 1/9 Debris Flow, efforts to repair and rebuild Montecito are ongoing. We continue to provide resources for rebuilding and repair of homes destroyed or damaged by the debris flow through a streamlined and expedited approach that enables our community to recover and rebuild as quickly as possible.

For Montecito to reach full recovery, rebuilding of properties was essential. The community needed clear guidance on the rebuilding process with a focus on providing protection to the community from future debris flows. Initial inspections after the debris flow resulted in 631 red, yellow or green tagged structures (243 red, 187 yellow, 221 green). As of January 2021, 445 structures are green-tagged, 72 are red-tagged, and 114 are yellow-tagged.

The FEMA Hazard Mapping processes was completed in June of 2018, which was a critical step to provide guidance regarding rebuilding in the community. The Planning and Development Department (P&D) developed special guidelines to assist impacted property owners in the rebuilding process by streamlining planning and permitting. For example, the “like for like” ordinance (i.e., no change in design, size, scale and footprint) was adopted to help exempt projects from planning permits and the Montecito Board of Architectural Review (MBAR).

Critical to facilitating the rebuilding process was reestablishing a survey control network and mapping to assist property owners to determine property lines.

County P&D developed a GIS map enabling property owners to see the same information as staff without the need to print or assemble physical case files. The GIS map is a critical rebuilding tool for architects, agents, affected property owners, and County staff.

For 1/9 Debris Flow recovery information, go to ReadySBC.org/rebuild

PLANNING PERMITS

| Like-for-Like Exemptions: | 67 Submitted; 49 Issued |
| Land Use Permits: | 5 Submitted; 3 Approved |
| Coastal Development Permits: | 8 Submitted; 7 Approved |

BUILDING PERMITS

| Building Permits: | 112 Submitted; 103 Issued |
| Counter Permits: | 182 Submitted; 182 Issued |

STATUS OF CASES (61% COMPLETE)

- 322 projects are completed
- 59 projects are active
- 74 projects awaiting property owner action
- 7 projects inactive
- 63 property owners have had no contact with P&D

Mapping layers include zoning designations, 100-year flood hazard areas and pre- and post-disaster aerial imagery. This unique web-based map contains project specific information that previously was not available in one location.

All impacted property owners were assigned a case manager to be a single point of contact. Find your case manager by clicking on the parcel on the interactive Impacted Properties Map. Due to the pandemic, P&D is open by appointment. Please call (805) 568-2090 or send an email to pad@co.santa-barbara.ca.us.
COMMUNITY WELLNESS AND PARTNERSHIPS

To provide resources, a place of connection, and ongoing support to the community, the County operated the Montecito Center for Preparedness, Recovery and Rebuilding from March through September 2018 with community partners including the Orfalea Foundation, United Way and the Community Wellness Team. After the center closed, County staff continues to provide coordination and case management assistance to residents through the departments of Planning and Development, Public Works, Behavioral Wellness, and First District Supervisor Das Williams’ office.

One of the primary mental health resources was the Community Wellness Team (CWT), a collaboration of local agencies working together to support the wellness of our communities. In response to the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow, the CWT added California HOPE 805 to the team. Services provided included crisis counseling, grief/bereavement counseling, psychological first aid, spiritual care, first responder critical incident stress debriefing, and short and long-term counseling to intensive outpatient care offered through Cottage Health. In total, more than 20,000 services were provided. The Community Wellness Team continues to provide ongoing mental health support to the community. For information, go to sbccwt.org.

Other community partners and members came together during this time, including the Bucket Brigade, FEMA, Habitat for Humanity, Women’s Economic Venture (WEV), 805 Conservation, The American Institute of Architects (SB Chapter), the Partnership for Resilient Communities, Montecito Association, staff from First District County Supervisor Williams’ office, MERRAG (pronounced “mirage”) network of trained volunteers who live and/or work in the Montecito area, and many others.

For 1/9 Debris Flow recovery information, go to ReadySBC.org/rebuild