



# SANTA ROSA TUBBS FIRE

STRATEGY INCLUDED A STREAMLINED PERMITTING PROCESS,  
RECOVERY WEBSITE, AND DATA TRACKER

## QUICK FACTS

Santa Rosa, founded in 1833, is a Northern California city in Sonoma County. Sonoma County was one of the original counties when California became a state in 1850. It is known for its wineries.

Population around 179,000; 67% white; poverty level 10.3%

42.7 square miles

FY 2022-23 proposed budget is \$480 million, up from \$474.9 million FY 2021-22. The proposed general fund budget is \$190.3 million, up from \$182.5 million in FY 2021-22

57,514 housing units; 3,098 structures destroyed in 2017 Tubbs fire

Council-manager form of government; 7 councilmembers are elected by district and serve four-year terms; the mayor and vice mayor are named by the council, serving two-year and one-year terms respectively

Partners: Chamber of Commerce

## INTRODUCTION

The October 8, 2017, Tubbs Fire traveled 12 nautical miles to the Santa Rosa city limits in a little over three hours. It did not spread linearly, but moved in multiple directions simultaneously impacting several city neighborhoods. There were nine fatalities in the city. The 3,098 buildings destroyed included 2,668 single-family homes, (5% of the housing stock) 209 multifamily homes, 190 mobile homes, and 31 commercial buildings. The city lost 25 percent of its hotel inventory. City Manager Sean McGlynn said the devastation “resembled a lunar landscape.”

Recovery is the most important part of the leadership conversation, even in the first 24-48 hours of the response period, McGlynn notes. He asked leadership team, “What gets us to recovery?” The consensus was that debris removal was a top priority because recovery cannot begin without it.

Most of the 3000 homes that were lost were part of a planned development, so owners had little to no experience building a home. City staff recognized that people would be starting from scratch and the city would have to process 3000 individual developers as residents rebuilt. There were not enough staff to meet the need and Santa Rosa already had a staffing shortage. Another challenge was that there were few places for additional staff or consultants to stay. The city manager designated existing staff to take on recovery tasks, supplemented with outside consultants. The city council passed urgency ordinances to allow expedited review for hillside development and designs and to waive fees for discretionary planning, demolition and temporary housing permits. These ordinances allowed residents to live in temporary housing like RVs or tiny homes on their property while rebuilding and provided an incentive to construct new detached accessory dwelling units.

## PLANNING FOR RECOVERY WHILE IN EMERGENCY MODE

Paul Lowenthal, then the Assistant Fire Marshal for Santa Rosa, took on the lead role for recovery team. There were three primary taskforces established early on in the recovery: debris, watershed, and housing. Paul was assigned debris. He had personal and professional motivations to take on this responsibility. People related to Paul, not just because he was directing the effort, but because he, too, had lost his home and had to fill out the right-of-entry forms like everyone else. His story helped build trust in the community during countless

community meetings and helped increase the number of property owners that participated in the government sponsored debris removal program.

Like 80 percent of Santa Rosa residents, Paul had insurance that paid for the Petaluma rental he found about 20 minutes away. Many residents stayed with family and friends as housing and hotel accommodations were scarce.

Staff serving on the recovery team were senior enough to be able to make decisions. Every debris task force meeting had an agenda that included action items, assignments, and reports. Issues included coordinating debris removal with local, state and federal partners, infrastructure repairs with the PG&E utility, addressing illegal harvesting of trees, and dealing with damaged storm drains and sewer laterals. Communicating with residents was a top priority; a public information liaison provided critical information to the community about the public health hazards.

The recovery team recognized that another critical order of business was to boost capacity for the city's building and permitting operations and the city council approved an expedited contract, allowing a quick solicitation for an outside firm to operate a separate permit center that was exclusively for fire survivors. The city awarded the contract to Bureau Veritas to review building permit plans, conduct inspections, and answer general questions.

## MELTED PLASTIC PIPES COMPLICATED THE RECOVERY PROCESS

How could the city seek reimbursement from FEMA if the burned water and sewer infrastructure repairs were not covered by existing policies? The city's initial estimate was that these repairs could cost up to \$40 million. Historically, FEMA policies and contracts had been used to remove debris following hurricanes, tornados, and floods. Removing ash and contaminated soils following a devastating wildfire was essentially unexplored territory for FEMA. Simple items like capping a sewer lateral (after a tornado) were practiced tasks that FEMA found easy to accomplish while the added costs of digging to repair or replace damaged pipes were very difficult for the agency to process.

In the first phase of debris removal, city staff focused on the higher density areas and capped some water lines to address contamination caused when the plastic in sewer pipes had melted, releasing chemicals like Benzene. They tested water samples to determine where leakage had occurred. After the water and sewer system was stabilized, debris could be removed privately or by the Army Corps of Engineers. Other environmental challenges included protecting creeks in the region from storm water runoff.

## ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS AND REPORTING PROGRESS

The city held over 250 rebuild and recovery meetings and the city council established a rebuild/build ad hoc committee that met weekly with city recovery staff. Weekly fire recovery and rebuilding updates were added to city council meeting agendas.

Using available technology, the city developed tools to track recovery efforts that were easily accessible to all staff, residents, and reporters and included maps, parcel report searches, a rebuild data tracker, and a dashboard of FEMA

public assistance. The rebuild data tracker ([www.srcity.org/rebuild](http://www.srcity.org/rebuild)) includes a menu of maps showing progress on clean up, permit reviews, permits issued, properties under construction, park projects, and rebuilding completed. Because of the water contamination concerns, a water quality map showed water sampling investigations and results throughout the city. The site provides updates on repairing the \$70 million in damage to critical water and transportation infrastructure, facilities, parks, and open spaces.

The city kept careful records of employee time devoted to the recovery effort, helpful in informing the community and for FEMA documentation.

## BUSINESS CHALLENGES AND A STREAMLINED PERMITTING PROCESS

Planning and economic development staff met with developer groups and the business community to find out what they needed to rebuild and to explain the permitting process. While a few places that burned like the Fountain Grove Inn did not reopen, the site is slated for the development of a six-building, 224-unit rental project. About 75 percent of businesses were able to get back up and running in a few weeks or months.

The city's streamlined the permitting process not only helped fire survivors navigate the rebuilding process, it also encouraged property owners to contact the city's permit center to discuss any issues they may have encountered in working with their construction contractor. The site also includes links to the California State Licensing Board if they seek to file a complaint online or report a complaint to the District Attorney's Consumer Law Decision. Fire survivors can find resource documents on the Santa Rosa recover website, including landscape design, setbacks, and zoning requirements, as well as how to obtain temporary occupancy.

## FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Five years after the Tubbs fire, Santa Rosa continues rebuilding. The city had financial reserves it could tap for some initial recovery costs, such as advancing permit fees to the private company that was tasked with collecting them from residents and businesses. Following the wildfire, the city worked with FEMA and Cal OES to organize the city's recovery efforts into 29 projects with an initial estimate of \$111 million, \$69 million of which was approved by FEMA. Cal OES hazard mitigation grants, the Federal Highway Administration Emergency Relief Program, Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery grants, and PG & E settlement funds have covered \$59 million of the project costs. The city continues to pursue funds for its ongoing recovery needs.

## SUCCESS FACTORS AND TAKEAWAYS

Focus on recovery in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and consider how best to manage it. Santa Rosa relied on its own staff to lead the recovery effort and supplemented with some consulting contracts. Developers want certainty in the rebuilding process and appreciate knowing exactly what is required.

One takeaway is the importance of having conversations with leaders at all levels of government. Climate change is affecting the scale of wildfire disasters today and what happened to infrastructure in Santa Rosa was unprecedented. California

state agencies have used the Santa Rosa experience to model other disaster responses. The intensity of massive wildfires means that governments need to be prepared to address far-reaching environmental and public health challenges

Disaster recovery is a team effort and people will come together to help. That said, it's important to establish a lead organization for the recovery process. The city prioritized communication with residents and with the many private and nonprofit partners that contributed. Patience with residents is important as they are in a steep learning curve to figure out how to approach rebuilding. Leaning in on technology solutions and providing up-to-date maps of progress made it easy for everyone to stay informed and find resources.

Santa Rosa has changed its approach to community engagement after the Tubbs fire experience. It uses low tech and high tech communications like fire weather notifications as well as town halls and community meetings. The community is much more engaged, aware, alert, and prepared.

## REFERENCES

Interviews, emails, and supplemental materials from the following supported this report:

- Sean McGlynn, Santa Rosa's city manager from 2014-2021.
- Paul Lowenthal, Division Chief Fire Marshal, Santa Rosa Fire Department

## WEB RESOURCES – SANTA ROSA

[www.srcity.org/rebuild](http://www.srcity.org/rebuild)

<https://srcity.org/3030/Restoring-Parks>

<https://www.srcity.org/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=1632>

## YOUTUBE VIDEOS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsKGj3fAIKk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkYlpuUn9LO>