

Controversial Developments Withstand Wildfires

The October 2007 wildfires that burned across 600 square miles of Southern California and destroyed 1,500 homes have provided the first real-world test of the controversial “shelter in place” (SIP) program. Designed to permit residents of planned developments that meet strict fire-safety standards to remain in their homes as fires approach, SIP was developed after wildfires in the area destroyed 2,400 homes and killed 18 civilians in 2003.

Homes in SIP communities — which tend to be very high-end — incorporate numerous fire-resistant features, including non-combustible roofing and siding; boxed eaves with screened vents (to resist windblown embers); interior sprinkler systems; tempered-glass windows; and a 100-foot “defensible space” around the exterior, within which ungaraged vehicles, certain types of vegetation, and other easily ignited materials are prohibited. The communities as a whole are required to provide an adequate water supply for firefighters; roads and driveways wide enough to accommodate two-way traffic and firefighting equipment; and a perimeter “buffer zone” of fire-resistant vegetation.

Some health and safety advocates strongly object to the SIP concept, arguing that it’s dangerous and irresponsible to leave residents — including those with respiratory problems — cut off from help and exposed to smoke, ash, and fumes. And anti-sprawl activists say the SIP program encourages developers to build in remote areas.

Such arguments are likely to persist. Nevertheless, the fact that all five of the SIP developments built in San Diego County’s Rancho Santa Fe Fire Prevention District survived the fires suggests that highly fire-resistant developments are at least plausible.

According to fire-prevention district spokesperson Julie Taber, no homes in either of the two SIP communities directly hit by the 200,000-acre Witch Creek fire were destroyed, and only one home suffered significant damage. The fire itself was “pretty severe,” she says. “At Cielo, especially, they had quite a bit of fire up and through and around the houses.”

The one case of damage involved a garage door that ignited because combustible material had been piled against it; fortunately, the flames were extinguished when the sprinkler head just inside the door activated. — *Jon Vara*

■ A recent Finnish study of worker lifting techniques, which is summarized on the “Occupational Hazards” Web site, concludes that employer efforts to teach proper lifting techniques are completely ineffective at reducing work-related back injuries, as is the use of protective devices like back belts. Study author Kari-Pekka Martimo speculates that the failure of all the teaching methods examined may mean that improved lifting techniques simply don’t exist.

■ “Renovation parties” — allegedly a trend among homeowners looking to save money on remodeling projects — have resulted in myriad problems caused by alcohol and ineptitude, reports the *Wall Street Journal*. The paper cites such examples as hanging drywall backward, removing the wrong walls, and using a Sawzall to cut through wiring, and quotes NARI secretary Dean Herriges as saying, “These parties are invitations for disaster.”

■ The National Association of Realtors estimates that existing home sales for 2007 will be 10.8 percent lower than 2006 sales. That prediction, released in October, marks the association’s eighth straight downward revision of the figure. Its first estimate for 2007, released in February, predicted a sales decline of only 0.6 percent.

Legislation Puts Heavy Burden on Florida Roofers

A recently enacted Florida law has brought residential reroofing in much of the state to a virtual standstill. HB 7057, which took effect on October 1, requires roofing contractors replacing a roof on any single-family residential structure built before March 2002 to upgrade the deck nailing schedule and add a peel-and-stick secondary moisture barrier. In addition, if the home is valued at more than \$300,000 and is located in Florida's coastal wind-borne-debris zone, roof-to-wall connections must be beefed up with added structural clips or straps and, at gable-end walls, with extra bracing.

One problem with the new law is that enhancing roof-to-wall connections is generally considered structural work, which under Florida law must be performed by a licensed general contractor. Steve Munnell, a spokesman for the Florida Roofing, Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors Association, says that at least a million Florida homes now require an additional permit, a GC as well as a roofer, and a minimum of two extra inspections for a simple reroofing job. As a result, he says, countless stripped roof decks will be unnecessarily exposed to weather for days or weeks.

An even bigger problem, according to Munnell and other critics, is that there's no evidence the law will make structures any stronger. They attribute this to a provision — apparently intended to protect consumers from price gouging — that caps the cost of the required changes at 15 percent of the total price of the reroofing job. "For that money, the GC probably can't do much more than tear off some roof sheathing and add some ties at the corners," Munnell says.

The final irony, says Munnell, is that existing roof-to-wall connections, even on older houses, seem to hold up perfectly well in the face of high winds. "I saw a lot of blown-off shingles and tile after Hurricane Charlie [in 2004]," he says, "but you didn't have structural failures unless the roof deck was penetrated by a falling tree or some kind of missile."

Industry trade groups and state agencies — including the Florida Building Commission, which admin-

■ Are builders becoming political punching bags? According to the *Washington Post*, a couple of Prince William County, Va., politicians engaged in some builder-bashing during a news conference held in October outside the local office of the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association. "What really disgusts me," said county board of supervisors chairman Corey A. Stewart, speaking of the alleged hiring of illegal immigrants by residential builders, "is they're not the ones paying the price. We pay the price." The next day, association vice president Jim Williams responded that "the grandstanding the chairman is doing is probably the lowest point I have seen in election politics in over 30 years."

■ So-called "anti-monotony ordinances" have become a popular tool of town planners in upscale Chicago suburbs, reports the *Chicago Tribune*. An ordinance enacted in April in the city of Woodstock, for instance, prohibits the town from issuing building permits for houses that the local building inspector finds to be similar in appearance to any dwelling on the same street or within 300 feet. "We don't want people to drive down the streets and see the same facade over and over again," explains city planning and zoning administrator Jim Kastner.

■ Real estate foreclosures are increasing the threat of West Nile virus, say health officials in Contra Costa County, Calif. Mosquitoes are breeding rapidly in the swimming pools and spas of many of the county's 10,000 foreclosed properties, nearly half of which are in areas at highest risk for the mosquito-borne illness. There were eight cases of West Nile virus in Contra Costa county in 2006, including two fatalities.

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isters the Florida Building Code — tried to persuade legislators to postpone the law's enactment for a year, in hopes that its worst flaws could be fixed in the interim.

Now that they've failed, the mood among many roofers is gloomy. "We're getting calls from homeowners who want to know if they should hold off on a new roof until things are straightened out," Munnell says. "A lot of those jobs are probably going to be done by homeowners or unlicensed guys working without a permit." — *Jon Vara*

Building Department Probe Yields Multiple Arrests

Builders and taxpayers in the western Long Island town of North Hempstead had reason to cheer this fall when investigators with the Nassau County district attorney's office arrested four former and present employees of the town building department as part of a 16-month probe into what District Attorney Kathleen Rice called "a systemic ring of greed and corruption."

All four of those arrested on October 15 face possible prison terms of up to seven years. The most prominent suspect, former building commissioner David Wasserman, faces a 29-count indictment alleging that he ran an illegal architectural practice, forged and altered town records, and received illegal gratuities for approving construction of a local gym. Former deputy commissioner Joseph Madden was charged with accepting cash bribes in exchange for inspection certifications and approval of building plans. Joseph Acierno, a former department plans examiner, was charged with illegally drafting architectural plans, filing false financial disclosure documents, and underreporting his personal income to New York state.

And current building inspector Thomas McDonough was charged with four counts of bribery and grand larceny by extortion, allegedly for refusing to inspect a drywell unless the homeowner purchased \$900 worth of tickets for a political fund-raiser.

The October 15 arrests followed the August arrest of

another former North Hempstead official, plumbing inspector Joseph Lomanaco, who was charged with lying on the town's financial disclosure form and filing a permit application on his own home years after completing the work.

A spokesman from the district attorney's office refused to comment on the likelihood of additional arrests.

The question now — given Nassau County's longstanding reputation for corruption among political appointees — is whether the arrests will prompt other building officials to clean up their acts.

Area remodeler Mike Sloggatt, who does business throughout Nassau County, says that while he hopes the arrests have a good effect, questionable practices remain widespread and deeply entrenched.

"I don't play that game," he says, "but some of my customers have." He tells of an incident from his own experience in which a homeowner, informed that it would take several months to get a building permit, said, "Give me the plans, I'll take care of it." The following day, the customer was back with the approved plans in hand.

"Later on," Sloggatt says, "I got a call from the guy. He said, 'You don't want to go to the Republican Ball, do you?' The tickets had cost him a few hundred bucks, but he thought it was worth it." — *Jon Vara*