

## UNEVEN RECOVERY: RANCHO BERNARDO TWO YEARS AFTER THE 2007 WITCH CREEK FIRE

During the early morning hours of October 21, 2007 the Witch Creek fire roared through the San Diego community of Rancho Bernardo. Especially hard hit were the neighborhoods of *The Trails*, *Westwood*, and *Montelena*.

In the hours and days that followed, local, state and federal agencies sprung into action. Community volunteers, often bringing to bear their own experiences learned during the 2003 fires, rolled up their sleeves and got to work. Recovery centers were opened, permits were expedited, and regulatory agencies work diligently to help fire victims begin the task of rebuilding.

In October 2009, the National University System Institute for Policy Research visually inspected 257 homes identified by the *San Diego Union-Tribune* as having burned in the Rancho Bernardo community<sup>1</sup>. Homes were classified as being fully rebuilt, under construction, or as not having begun the process of rebuilding. In less than a dozen instances it was impossible to ascertain the status of rebuilding as the property was located in an area inaccessible from the public right of way. We also did not include several dozen rebuilt homes in fire damaged areas which did not appear in the *Union-Tribune's* data base.

We found that 68% of homes which we could visually inspect had been rebuilt. Another 12% were under construction with 20% of homes still showing few visible signs of having started the reconstruction process.

However, those statistics don't tell the full story. Whereas the communities of *Westwood* and *Montelena* are almost entirely rebuilt (77% of homes rebuilt with another 9% under construction), we found that 41% of the properties in *The Trails* listed as burned or damaged have not yet begun rebuilding. 18% were under construction and only 39% have been rebuilt.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://fire.signonsandiego.com/>

This uneven pattern of reconstruction is important to understand. Large custom homes take longer to design and build than smaller homes on relatively uniform lots. It may be that the kind of homes built in *The Trails* pose particular challenges to insurers and public agencies responsible for providing permits. Some homeowners may have decided that they did not wish to rebuild on the edge of the wild land-urban interface. These questions are important for the City to explore when wildfires come to other communities, such as La Jolla, South University City, or Mission Hills which are located at the wildland-urban interface and where most homes, like *The Trails*, are custom built.

**Table 1**

Homes Destroyed or Damaged in Rancho Bernardo

	Rebuilt	Under Construction	Lot Cleared but No Construction Evident
<b>Outside of <i>The Trails</i></b>	148 (77%)	18 (9%)	25 (13%)
<b>Within <i>The Trails</i></b>	26 (39%)	13 (19%)	27 (41%)
<b>Total</b>	174 (68%)	31 (12%)	52 (20%)

