

May 25, 2004

FireWise Council - Public Meeting Outcomes

In attendance: Kristine Borchers, Pam Wilson, Laurie Robison, Richard Risk, Louise Lawson, Philip Walters, Tammy Tyner, Ron Tyner, Nicole Smith, Susan Bryson, Cindy Swan, JT Coyne, Joy Mathis, Mike Kane Jr, Mike Kane Sr, Byard Peake, Robert Koenig, Howard Rachlin, Ben Cordova, Renate Widder, Paul Dzuibek, Jackie Dzuibek, Dave Abercrombie.

Developing an Evacuation Plan

Dave Abercrombie of the Durango Fire Department provided information to residents on how to prepare for an evacuation. For a copy of his 9-page handout (which includes checklists), please contact Kristine Borchers (info@fireready.com, 970-749-7267). His program focused on:

- 1) Identifying if you are at risk from wildfire
- 2) What to do when wildfire threatens
- 3) What to do if evacuation is necessary
- 4) Disaster and evacuation supplies
- 5) What to do after a wildfire

First Line of Defense mitigation video

The brand-new mitigation video was shown. *First Line of Defense: Homeowners Stand Up To Wildfire* is a locally produced 30-minute video about how southwest-Colorado residents worked to lessen their risk to wildfire. The video highlights an actual “defensible space” project at one woman’s home in a ponderosa pine forest that partially burned in the Missionary Ridge Fire of 2002. The camera follows her, a forester, and a mitigation crew as they determine the risks, needs, and choices they face, then taking it step-by-step to thin and trim brush and trees around the home, ultimately making it safer from wildfire. Integrated into this video are personal stories and experiences from individuals and families who either lost a home, saved a home, or hope to save a home through defensible space thinning. The film is a partnership production of the Office of Community Services at Fort Lewis College and Durango Community Access Television, Cable Channel 22. It was funded and supported by the San Juan Public Lands Center and the Colorado State Forest Service.

Free DVD and VHS copies of *First Line of Defense* will be arriving soon at the San Juan Public Lands Center. For more information, contact Pam Wilson, Fire Information Officer, at (970) 385-1230. (Some of you already requested copies. These will be sent out as soon as they come in).

Roundtable Discussion (without a round table)

(Disclaimer – please forgive any omissions. My notes are not as complete as they should be.)

The purpose of this Discussion was to hear from homeowner associations and neighborhoods at risk to wildfire – for the Council to find out what is going on with education and community-mitigation efforts, and to identify common challenges facing neighborhoods. As we saw in the exchange of challenges and ideas, there is great potential in these listening and solution-oriented sessions. (Next time we will plan a longer time-period). The Council plans on following-up this Discussion with future events and more “working meetings.”

- q **Falls Creek Ranch**, Byard Peak – north of Durango, Valley Fire burned homes in subdivision. Incidentally, burned home/lot just sold - - because of views. Initial drop in real estate prices, but do recover at least somewhat. Falls Creek – very active subdivision, with regards to reducing wildfire risk. Received a challenge cost-share grant, for \$41,000 – matched it for a

total of \$82,000 project. Common-land projects. Created a phone list for residents, which included cell phone numbers (not many neighbors knew these). Developed a map of the subdivision, including where the fire hydrants were. Copies distributed, makes it easier for fire department responding to a fire.

- q **Tripp Creek Subdivision**, Joy Mathis – north of Durango, near Trimble Hot Springs. Six homeowners, six to ten acres per lot. Evacuated during the Valley Fire, fire got as close as half-a-mile to this subdivision. Subdivision has pinyon-brush-oak-ponderosa. Forest Service land behind. Sloped terrain. Scott and Joy were the first ones to “break the rule” and cut trees. Neighbors saw the work, liked how it looked, inspired them to also do mitigation work. Firefighters mentioned what a great job was done (during Valley fire). Joy has been able to talk to neighbors about the forest health, which has a benefit of wildfire-risk-reduction. They host an annual forest party in the now parklike area behind their home. And its beautiful! Some neighbors have not participated in
- q **Mesa Vista Subdivision**, Bob Koenig – near Durango Hills, small subdivision, 8 lots, several out-of-state property owners. Ponderosa pine landscapes. Have had good success with resident-owners doing the work. Interested in finding out more about the Good Neighbors grant program. Probably not realistic to change covenants, using mostly education-outreach efforts to “inspire.”
- q **Vista de Oro Subdivision**, JT Coyne – down south, in the dryside. Thirty-six 35-acre lots. Concerned about access to subdivision, so talked to neighboring ranches for permission to have access onto ranch roads. Created an additional escape route via Southern Ute tribal lands. Encouraged lot-owners to do the work. Highlighted mitigation work – once neighbors saw the work done, were more inclined to do it. Continually distribute FireWise information, as well as presentations at annual meeting. Bought a subdivision-owned spray rig to combat the beetle-epidemic. Asked lotowners for permission to clear brush along property lines (50-foot on each side) to create firebreaks. Asked each resident to install a 3,000 gallon cistern for emergency water supply. A blue reflector on the post indicates to the fire department that the cistern has water in it.
- q **Los Ranchitos Subdivision**, Paul and Jackie Dzuibek – northeast of Durango, 55 lots, 3- to 5-acres per lot, 2 entrances to the subdivision. Los Ranchitos received a cost-share grant several years ago. This helped encourage landowners to do the work. Los Ranchitos property owners run the whole spectrum from those who have done a lot of fire mitigation to those who have done a little to those who have done none. The majority in the area have done at least something. The Missionary Ridge fire came onto one lot. Primary concerns for the subdivision – apathy, losing interest with the fire-risk, those who live out of the area not concerned. Los Ranchitos sits against the Colorado Trails dude ranch, so mitigation efforts from that neighbor are important to the residents. Colorado Trails ranch has been dealing with mudslides. There are no covenants within Los Ranchitos to require the work. Education efforts have been fairly successful. Plan on inviting Colorado State Forest Service to annual meeting. Los Ranchitos is currently waiting to find out about another cost-share grant. Paul and Jackie feel like that could jump-start residents again into doing work. Los Ranchitos has done small group-projects, like bringing a chipper in for a day and splitting the cost between neighbors.

- q **Elk Stream Springs Ranch**, Richard Risk and Philip Walters – Elk Stream sits on the county line between La Plata and Montezuma counties. There are 35 lots, with appx 35-acres per lot (one lot is 70 acres) – total of about 1,000 acres. Eight homes, four of the homes are full-time residents, four are out-of-area. The subdivision butts up against BLM land. Richard said that their neighborhood efforts could be broken into four steps:

1. *Awareness* (evacuated due to close fires)
2. *Assessment/education* (attended last April's FireWise workshop, used the assessment tool for subdivisions, shared Colorado State Forest Service info with owners, began taking issue seriously)
3. *Action* (owners have voluntarily taxed themselves to provide for an annual fire mitigation project, such as improving right-of-way access; continue to provide information to owners and encourage mitigation work on individual lots)
4. *Results* (prepared a fire plan; incorporated FireWise principles into design committee requirements; have accomplished two annual common-mitigation projects, implemented a seasonal fire watch patrol – each volunteer takes a week - - after a thunderstorm, drive the canyon looking for smokes; bringing sheep and goats into the subdivision this summer to reduce new growth).

Richard also mentioned the need to be able to be first-responders in your neighborhood (prepared for a small wildfire). The idea that you dial 9-1-1 and the fire department arrives minutes later is just not possible in our rural areas. This might be a new concept for people who move out of urban areas into the country. Philip suggested that during the Cow Creek fire, when people's homes were triaged (save or not), this inspired many owners to get involved. Potentially a fake-triage day.

- q **Durango Hills Subdivision**, Howard Rachlin – northeast of Durango, seventy lots, each lot 3- to 10-acres. Started in 1970's. Used to have a formal HOA, no longer do. No covenants, no cohesive-ness, long-time residents don't want regulations and/or out-of-staters coming in a telling what to do. Created a Council for Fire and Public Safety, to push also the idea of ambulance-access. Asked for addresses/emails – didn't get great response. Stuffed mailboxes with information. Asked Fire Department up to do home assessments. Did an Open House, providing fire mitigation information – not good response. Several homeowners getting together and renting chipper. Some properties in the subdivision have the "FireWise" signs (identifying this as a good defensible space). Overall, just not a cohesive group, difficult to disseminate information and get involvement.

- q **Cedar Mesa Ranches**, Susan Bryson – Cedar Mesa Ranches is located in Montezuma County, north of the entrance to Mesa Verde National Park. 139 lots, each lot from 6 to 45 acres, appx 2,000 acres of land, 10 miles of unmaintained County road. On all of this land, there are only 32 homes built, so the vacant lots are a significant problem. One way in (which means one way out). Borders BLM land. Majority of vegetation is pinyon-juniper, lots of beetle-killed pinyon. Action items:

- o Just created a website for the HOA, hope to provide additional information to (especially) out-of-area owners this way
- o James Dietrich of Montezuma County helped create a risk-map for the subdivision (problem – no common land, how to entice landowners – especially in the highest risk areas to do the work? - - - why should we do it if no one else is?)
- o BLM is doing some nearby projects with hydromowers
- o Have covenants for land with homes (require defensible space), but what about the vacant lots?

Recurring Challenges

- q Funding for the work
- q Apathy, especially with out-of-state owners or partial-year residents
- q Access in/out of subdivisions
- q “Why should we do the work if no one else is?”
- q Misconception of what a defensible space will look like (no trees)
- q “Want to leave in natural”

Suggested Solutions

- q Focus on the benefits of forest health, rather than dangers of fire (appeal to the idea of land stewardship) – increased property values (Council will follow-up on gathering the anecdotal information about increased property values, as we’ve discussed previously – Ron? Chas?); reduced competition with remaining trees; improved forest health; increased forage for grazing wildlife)
- q Highlight mitigated properties in area, do tours, do open houses – invite people to walk the land, see/experience the differences
- q Changing covenants is probably not realistic (many require 100% support). And top-down regulation might not be the best approach anyway. The group consensus was to focus on education and outreach efforts (positive peer pressure, rather than regulatory).
- q Overall feeling is that our community is becoming more proactively prepared for wildfire. The idea that “it’s what I have insurance for and/or this won’t happen to us” hasn’t been heard as much since the Missionary Ridge fire. Maybe time – however – to focus on forest health restoration.
- q Identify safety zones within a subdivision, if can’t get out (have Forest Service/Fire Department help).

Developers Required to do Mitigation?

Ron Tyner briefly brought up the idea about developers being required to do mitigation work, and how all benefit – the developer makes more money on the sale of the land, the work is done before a homeowner takes over. Many expressed positive support. Council will further pursue where this is at and how best to support/proceed (Ron – you are lead).

Next meeting: July 20, 2004 – La Plata Electric Association, 5:30 to 7:00 p.m.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Kristine Borchers

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