

BUTTE COUNTY GENERAL PLAN 2030

FIRE HAZARD ISSUES

BACKGROUND: The Alternatives Evaluation Report¹ designated 15 of 31 study areas as fire hazard areas. On 29 and 30 July the Board of Supervisors tentatively approved housing development for 22 of the study areas².

DISCUSSION: All or portions of 12 study areas³—tentatively approved for 44,000 dwelling units with a potential population of over 110,000—are located in fire hazard zones. Nine of the study areas are high or very high fire hazard zones⁴.

Wildland fires in Northern California during the early summer of 2008 emphasized the high danger to people and property of living in fire hazard areas. The loss of life was minimal and the loss of property was modest, but the potential remains for huge losses in both categories.

The current Policy Alternatives document for General Plan 2030 deals with potential fire hazards as a voluntary issue: “Encourage defensible space, fire safe building construction, fuel management and wildfire preparedness, particularly by working in collaboration with the Butte County Fire Safe Council, the municipalities and State agencies⁵.”

The current wording would seem to support the view that people should not be forced to build to special standards if they are willing to accept the risk of loss to a wildland fire, but virtually no one would argue that those same people should not receive firefighting response. And therein lies the public interest in mandating mitigation of the potential loss of life or private property in fire hazard areas. The cost of fire fighting is borne by the public at large—not only by the individual homeowners who chose to reside in especially risky areas—and an important way to protect the general public from the huge expenses associated with fighting and recovering from wildland fires is to mandate certain protective measure that would complement effective fire fighting organization.

RECOMMENDATION: In the Health and Safety Element of General Plan 2030, require measures to mitigate the potential damage and loss of life in fire hazard areas as follows:

- The County shall adopt, apply, and enforce defensible space standards for fire hazard areas.
- The County shall adopt and apply fire-resistant design and materials standards for new construction in fire hazard areas, high fire hazard areas, and very high fire hazard areas.
- The County shall work collaboratively with fire safe councils, municipalities, and State agencies to mitigate the threat of wildland fires.

¹ Butte County General Plan 2030 Alternatives Evaluation Report, Design, Community & Environment (DCE), March 13, 2008.

² <http://www.buttegeneralplan.net/products/4pa/>

³ Study areas 2, 4 thru 6, 8, 10 thru 13, 23, 24, and 26.

⁴ Study areas 4 thru 6, 8, 10 thru 13, and 23.

⁵ Butte County General Plan 2030, Policy Alternatives, August 2008, pg. 24.