

Fire and Forest
A Great Meeting, A Note on Hardening
by Mike Esnard
(from The Town Crier - July 2014)

We at the Fire Safe Council were very happy with the Town Hall meeting last week. The turnout was great and the room was packed. Best of all was the intelligent and focused discussion between the fire chiefs who comprised the panel and residents who attended. The questions and comments were smart, and the chiefs were candid and thoughtful in their answers. We are appreciative to all the residents who attended, and to Idyllwild Fire Chief Reitz, County Fire Chief Hawkins, and to USFS Chief Felix. It was a good gathering.

Of the many topics brought up by residents, two seemed to have particular force. The first was irritation over the fact that if a resident pays one of the local haulers to rake their needles and leaves and take the pile to the transfer site, they will be rejected and sent to the grinding station, where they will have to pay a special fee. The transfer site seems to be now enforcing the letter of their contract with the county to not let any commercial haulers dump at the transfer site. Some people feel this is unfair, since property owners have already paid for the use of the site in their yearly tax bill, and many are not able to do the work themselves.

The other issue raised was an older one—people are frustrated with others for not abating properties, especially owners of vacant lots who let the lots accumulate years of fuel. People want to see real teeth in laws to force people to clean up. Chief Hawkins said there was nothing he could do according to law, and that any change would have to come from the County Board of Supervisors creating a code with some force behind it. He suggested a petition from residents asking the BOS to act. The Fire Safe Council will discuss this at our July board meeting.

In the meantime, our staff wanted me to emphasize something that got passed over too quickly at the meeting—the concept of hardening homes.

There are two things that any homeowner can do to protect their property from wildfire. Fuel abatement, which is cleaning up all the dead and dying vegetation within a 100', and thinning both trees and brush, is well known to us all.

What is not as well known is hardening, which refers to making one's home harder to burn. In terms of hardening priorities, the roof is most important, which is why we were able to obtain a FEMA grant to replace wood shake and shingle roofs. Reroofing is expensive, but there are other actions that are less costly, such as replacing attic and basement vents with new, ember resistant models. Since embers in attics are a major cause of destruction in large fires, this is a very cost-effective action for a homeowner to take.

Another way to harden is replacing single pane windows with new double-paned windows. While this is expensive, one could start by replacing the windows on the most vulnerable sides of the house, generally the west and north, and replacing the rest when one's budget allows.

Finally, the easiest thing to do is to get flammable items, like furniture cushions, dried flowers, and 5-gallon propane tanks, off the deck and put them inside when you leave the house, especially if you need to evacuate.