

Guidance to Property Owners Montecito Debris Flow Rebuilds

March 13, 2018

County staff is working to assist property owners in the rebuild process following the January 9th debris flow in Montecito which occurred after a very significant rainfall event in the Thomas burn area. Unlike rebuilding after a fire, the current situation poses unique challenges. Property owners are encouraged to meet with their Planning and Development Case Manager who is assigned to their damaged or destroyed property. This will ensure the property owner has an understanding of the processes and challenges unique to recovery for their specific property.

The landforms have changed significantly, including property elevations and at some locations, the width and depths of creeks. Many survey monuments have been dislodged, and many property boundaries cannot be verified without professional surveys. The County's floodplain management ordinance is based in large part on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRM). However, the current FIRM maps are no longer representative of on-the-ground conditions due to the land-changing debris flow. The base flood elevations on the current FIRM maps do not reflect current topography and are of little use in the rebuilding process where topography has changed. FEMA will be developing new FIRM maps but this is expected to take four to five years.

Additionally, according to the U.S. Forest Service Burned Area Emergency Response Team and the State of California Watershed Emergency Response Team reports, the area is subject to ongoing threats of debris flows during significant rain events (a half inch of rain or more in an hour) for the next two to five years. In order to prevent potential damage to rebuilt structures and other structures in the community, any improvements that occur during this timeframe should be done with proper attention to changes in topography and new creek profiles.

To address the information deficiency in the short term, staff is working with FEMA on a flood hazard/recovery mapping analysis. Staff is also working with private consultants to conduct land surveys and engineering studies to reflect the current conditions and be used for rebuilding. These studies are expected to be complete in three months. The Recovery Mapping will be used to make prudent technical decisions regarding rebuilding in this immediate, and two to five year time frame. The studies will also inform any changes that may be required to Chapter 15A, the County's Flood Plain Management Ordinance.

Until these studies are complete, the County is advising property owners to temporarily delay making any significant expenditure on design plans so their decisions and permit applications can be informed by this work (expected to be complete in three months).

For those property owners who choose not to wait, the County recommends meeting with your Planning and Development case manager and Flood Control staff upfront to determine the submittal requirements to facilitate the permit review process. Requirements will depend on the situation of individual properties and may include:

1. Current topographic survey of project site and adjacent parcels.
2. Property line survey.
3. Hydrologic analyses of the project site to reflect post-burn (Thomas) conditions. Analysis should utilize and build upon the information in BAER, WERT, and Watershed Task Force technical studies.
 - a. Calculation of the current base flood elevations, inundation limits and possibly the floodway.
 - b. Key design elements include channel geomorphology, foundation considerations, and hydraulic capacity.
4. Preparation of plans may require utilization of experts in geotechnical, civil and hydraulic engineering, soil erosion, hydrology, and engineering geology.

As property owners consider the best method of rebuilding or repairing their properties, talking with your own experts about how to incorporate the debris deposited on your property may be very helpful. Maintaining some or all of the debris may reduce the overall costs of rebuilding by eliminating the removal of all debris.