

COMMUNITY MANAGER

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Extraordinary Efforts

What is the manager’s role when a community that’s been destroyed must be rebuilt?

BY JULIE WARREN

Like most residents in Sonoma County and the surrounding area, Carra Clampitt, CMCA, and her husband had very little time to evacuate their home in the middle of the night on Sun., Oct. 8. The Tubbs fire in Northern California started shortly before midnight, and—fueled by high winds from the northeast that gusted up to 45 mph—blazed southwest toward Santa Rosa and consumed everything over 12 miles in barely three hours.

The combination of high winds and plenty of fuel (brush, dry grasses, and flammable homes) ignited other devastating wildfires in the region that

burned simultaneously for days. Thousands of residents were evacuated.

“Some people had an hour to get out; others had only 20 minutes,” says Clampitt, who is senior vice president and district manager at Eugene Burger Management in Rohnert Park just south of Santa Rosa. It would be several days before anyone knew the extent of the damages to their homes and communities.

Clampitt’s home was spared. Many of the houses in her client communities were not. “We had four communities that were (totally) burned down,” she says. The Oaks at Fountaingrove was one of them. »

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CALL TO ACTION

All 46 of the homes—along with their contents, landscaping, and cars—in The Oaks at Fountaingrove were quickly destroyed during the early morning hours of Oct. 9. Tragically, one homeowner was trapped in her garage and perished. Many residents’ pets also were lost.

But before the week was out, Clampitt, along with Carol Melendez, The Oaks’ manager, had all five association board members in a conference room at the Eugene Burger Management office to meet with their attorney and Ken Kosloff, an architectural and reconstruction consultant. Melendez had already notified the insurance adjuster of the devastation.

“The first thing we did was account for every owner,” Clampitt says. “Then we suspended assessments.” Since all the residents had been displaced, she and Melendez also had to come up with alternate contact information for everyone.

There were lots of decisions to make quickly, and Clampitt realized the critical decisions were up to the board.

The managers’ role, according to Clampitt: “We’re here to help board members move into the business side of rebuilding their community.”

URGENT FIRST STEPS

Clampitt had worked with Kosloff, a principal at the architectural and construction consulting firm Richard Avaral and Associates, on previous projects. She asked him to act as the initial consultant for The Oaks’ board.

“It all starts with getting the right help, and time was of the essence,” says Kosloff, who teaches Facilities Management

(M-201), one of CAI’s Professional Management Development Program (PMDP) courses. “And most homeowner board members don’t know where to start.”

For Clampitt, it was essential that the association’s attorney was part of the conversation from the start to define the board’s role and responsibilities. “We also needed to be certain their directors & officers insurance covered their decisions,” she says.

“We’re here to help board members move into the business side of rebuilding their community.”

The Oaks’ had a unique master insurance policy that covered reconstruction of the entire community, including individual homes and their contents. But the board had to move quickly: The association’s CC&Rs required that reconstruction begin within 90 days of destruction, according to Elizabeth Anderson, The Oaks’ board president. Relocation reimbursements for individual homeowners would only last 24 months.

The board also had to decide right away what sources to engage to clean up the ash

and debris—a private contractor or agents of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Predicting correctly that FEMA would be overwhelmed and have limited capacity in the area, Kosloff recommended that the board hire a local contractor who carefully removed debris and tested the soil for toxins.

WHAT NEXT?

Other questions for the board: What contractor to hire to rebuild the homes? How to handle assessments in a community that has no residents—and no houses? And what to do with the (surprisingly) undamaged community pool and pool house? Managers and board members alike needed to know what to do in the first 48 hours. “And then what do you do in the first 30 days? The first 90 days?” Clampitt says.

Kosloff recognized that board members were traumatized and says he often had to repeat information. “They were in shock; no one was thinking clearly at the front end.”

He also knew he needed to help them avoid “fear-based decisions.”

BOARD MEMBERS’ COMMITMENT

Anderson had been president of The Oaks’ board barely two months when the wildfire decimated her house and community. “Most of us had lived in the neighborhood a very long time and had a grasp of what the CC&Rs and bylaws required of us,” she says. “Of course, whoever wrote (the CC&Rs) never imagined that every last house would be destroyed.”

She and other board members now accept that they have a commitment “no other board has ever had”—to rebuild



Although all 46 homes in The Oaks at Fountaingrove were burned to the ground on the night of Oct. 8, the community’s managers and board quickly marshaled resources and had the community prepared to rebuild within a few months.

their community from the footings to the roof caps. Because of the complexities and planning, Anderson compares the work the board is doing now to something like a “military campaign.”

Kosloff agrees and says the process “is not ‘business as usual.’”

“But these are all smart people,” he adds. “And they have one important quality: They listen.”

By February, four months after the fire, all lots in The Oaks were cleared and ready for construction to begin. The board reinstated assessment payments in January and has identified a builder. The footings for The Oaks’ houses will be poured in May. Kosloff says that because the competition is overwhelming for local, qualified contractors and building materials suppliers, it’s remarkable The Oaks has met this goal.

“This wouldn’t have happened without Ken,” Anderson says. She credits Clampitt with recommending the comprehensive insurance policy the community had in place before the wildfire happened. Anderson also praises Melendez, The Oaks’ manager: “She’s working 20 hours per week just for us. We take up 50 percent of her time. She is doing so much for us, because we have so much to do.”

Other burned-out communities have not been able to move their projects along as quickly as The Oaks, Kosloff says. For many, it may take as long as four to five years to rebuild the homes and amenities.

MANAGERS’ VALUE

Eugene Burger Management isn’t the only Northern California management company that assisted displaced residents and burned-out communities. And The Oaks at Fountaingrove wasn’t the only community that Clampitt and other managers in her company supported after the October wildfires.

In Sonoma County alone, Clampitt says nearly 5,000 homes went down. “And that doesn’t count Napa County. It truly was a firestorm,” she says.

In the days immediately after the fires, Clampitt met with other area management company owners whose clients had damaged properties to “share resources and information.”

Along with Kosloff, attorneys, and

insurance adjusters, Clampitt spoke with large groups of homeowners in rented halls and conference rooms. “We told them, ‘Here’s what we know; here’s what we don’t know.’ It was constant communication,” she says.

Staff provided cubicle space, conference rooms, and phones to board members from numerous communities whose homes may have been spared but who had been evacuated.

“Probably 12 to 15 board members came into the office the day after the fire,” says Clampitt. “We told them we have a bathroom and a coffee machine and kitchen. Just come hang out in our office if you need a place to sit and use a computer and use the phone.”

Managers also provided information about evacuation shelters, the Humane Society, how to contact FEMA, where to get building permits, and other resources.

“We’ve had lots of executive sessions,” Anderson says. “Carra makes sure the office is open to us when it’s the most convenient *for us*, and that we have whatever we need to conduct a meeting.

And if Carol can’t be there, Carra is there herself.”

PRESSURE ON MANAGERS

It’s important to note that some Eugene Burger Management employees also had been evacuated from their homes and were facing their own personal challenges while assisting homeowner clients.

To relieve employees’ stress, Clampitt reassigned and redistributed portfolios, took over the management of one community herself, and recruited a recently retired manager to come back to work temporarily to help with the extra workload.

She also offered managers privacy and downtime throughout each work day.

“The biggest challenge is the ability to detach emotionally from every single story—because everybody has a story—and be able to listen but not let it sink in so much that it debilitates us,” says Clampitt.

“We are of no value if we are so emotionally involved that we’re not able to provide a service.”

Julie Warren is editor of Community Manager and CAI’s manager for news and content.

New and Updated CAI Resources

FOR EFFECTIVE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RECOVERY

Master Your Disaster: Your Readiness, Response and Recovery Prep Guide (Community Edition) (Volume 2)

is the newest addition to CAI’s comprehensive collection of resources on how to manage communities threatened or devastated by unimaginable natural catastrophes. Author and recovery expert Leann Hackman-Carty prescribes a range of tactics for preparing a community for an impending disaster and techniques and timelines for recovering after.

» Available at www.caionline.org/shop. CAI members: \$18.95.

Natural Disasters: Preparation and Recovery—A Planning Guide for Managers and Officers

is the new Best Practices report from the acclaimed Foundation for Community Association Research. Who within your community should participate in a disaster planning task force? What are the manager’s, board members’, and residents’ roles? When and how should a community evacuate? What steps should you take to be better prepared to help homeowners recover? How and when should you communicate with residents, attorneys, and contractors when it’s time to rebuild, and when should you initiate a recovery plan?

» Available as a free downloadable PDF at www.cairf.org/best-practices-reports. A printed version may be purchased at cost for \$12.95 at www.caionline.org/shop.

Visit CAI’s Disaster Recovery web page at www.caionline.org/DisasterRecovery for more resources.

