

DISASTER REDEVELOPMENT

Coffey Park *A Case Study*



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Introduction

October 8th, 2017. Maybe it's just a random date to you, but for me it's the night my neighborhood went up in flames, in one of the most devastating wildfires in California history. It was around 1am in New York and I just happened to have woken up in the middle of sleep, which I don't often do. I saw my phone screen light up and I reached for it. It was a frantic text from my mother, "Napa is on fire" and a few seconds later... "Atlas Peak behind our house is on fire! I see the HUGE flames from the sofa here - big red flames." A few hours later, my whole town lost power, wifi, and cell service. Because of this, the next day I couldn't get ahold of my parents. I didn't know where they were, if they had evacuated, or if our house did actually burn down. I'll spare you the suspense, and let you know that my family is lucky. Despite flames coming just 1 mile from our house, we made it through the firestorm unscathed. Some of our friends weren't so lucky though, and lost just about everything. As my six-year old neighbor puts it: "my house burned down and I didn't even get to save my favorite stuffed animal."

The fires lasted two weeks. The smoke, haze, and air quality lingered longer. Since there was no power or cell service, most people evacuated, and spent time in other parts of the Bay Area. While fire fighters who came from all over the world worked tirelessly to put out the flames that seemed to keep spreading.

When I returned home just a few weeks later, the hills were black, my favorite dairy was in ruins, and all of my favorite Michelin star restaurants sat empty (a rather rare occurrence). While I was home, I learned that while the Atlas Peak Fire was the fire that affected my family, the Tubbs Fire, in Sonoma County, was actually more destructive. It alone took 5,636 structures and 22 lives. It wiped out a neighborhood within hours. The name of this neighborhood? Coffey Park. In Coffey Park, 1,304 homes burned down. This is what the core of this study is about. It's about how the community of Santa Rosa came together this past year to redevelop their beloved neighborhood.

The Tubbs Fire

The Tubbs Fire started on the evening of October 8th, 2017 off of Tubbs Lane in Calistoga. It is currently the worst known wildfire in California History in terms of structural damage. The Tubbs Fire alone burned 5,636 structures. It spanned 36,807 acres and took 22 lives.

One of the reasons the fire quickly spread over the hills and into Santa Rosa was due to the high warm winds that were present that night it began. Because of this, the fire reached the Coffey Park neighborhood, which quickly went up in flames, within a matter of hours. In fact, the fire came so quickly, that residents in this neighborhood weren't able to evacuate in time. By the early hours of the morning on October 9th, 2017, where 1304 homes once stood, was now piles of dust and rubble.

What's particularly interesting about this scenario, is the fact that Coffey Park was actually a highly dense residential neighborhood made up of a few different tract home communities. The homes weren't set far apart or up in the hills, like other neighborhoods that were burned, but rather on flat subdivided lots that were perfectly engineered and curated around a central location.

Photo Below: Remains of the Coffey Park Neighborhood after the Tubbs Fire swept through.

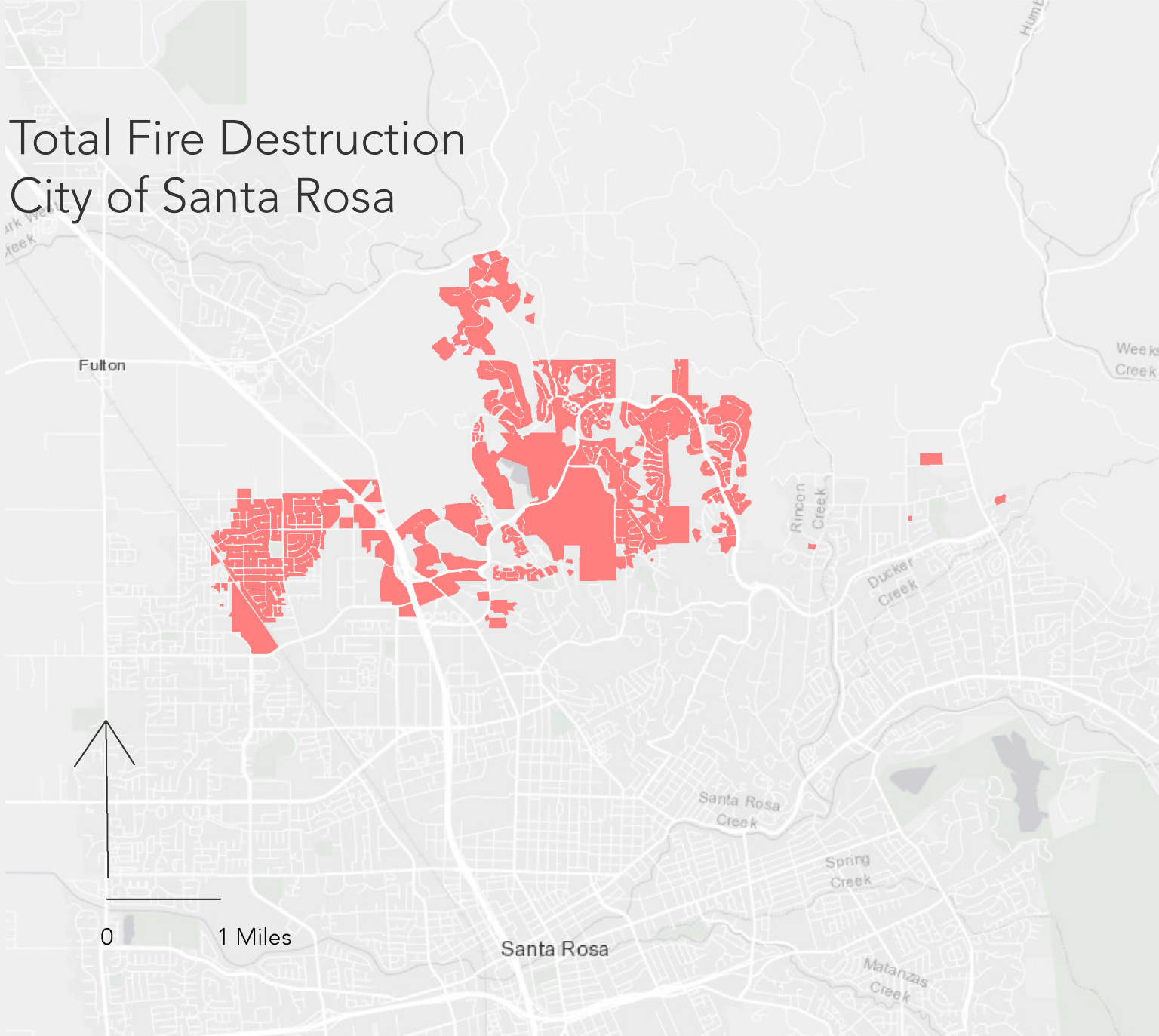


Area of Study

Close-up of Area of Interest,
Coffey Park Neighborhood



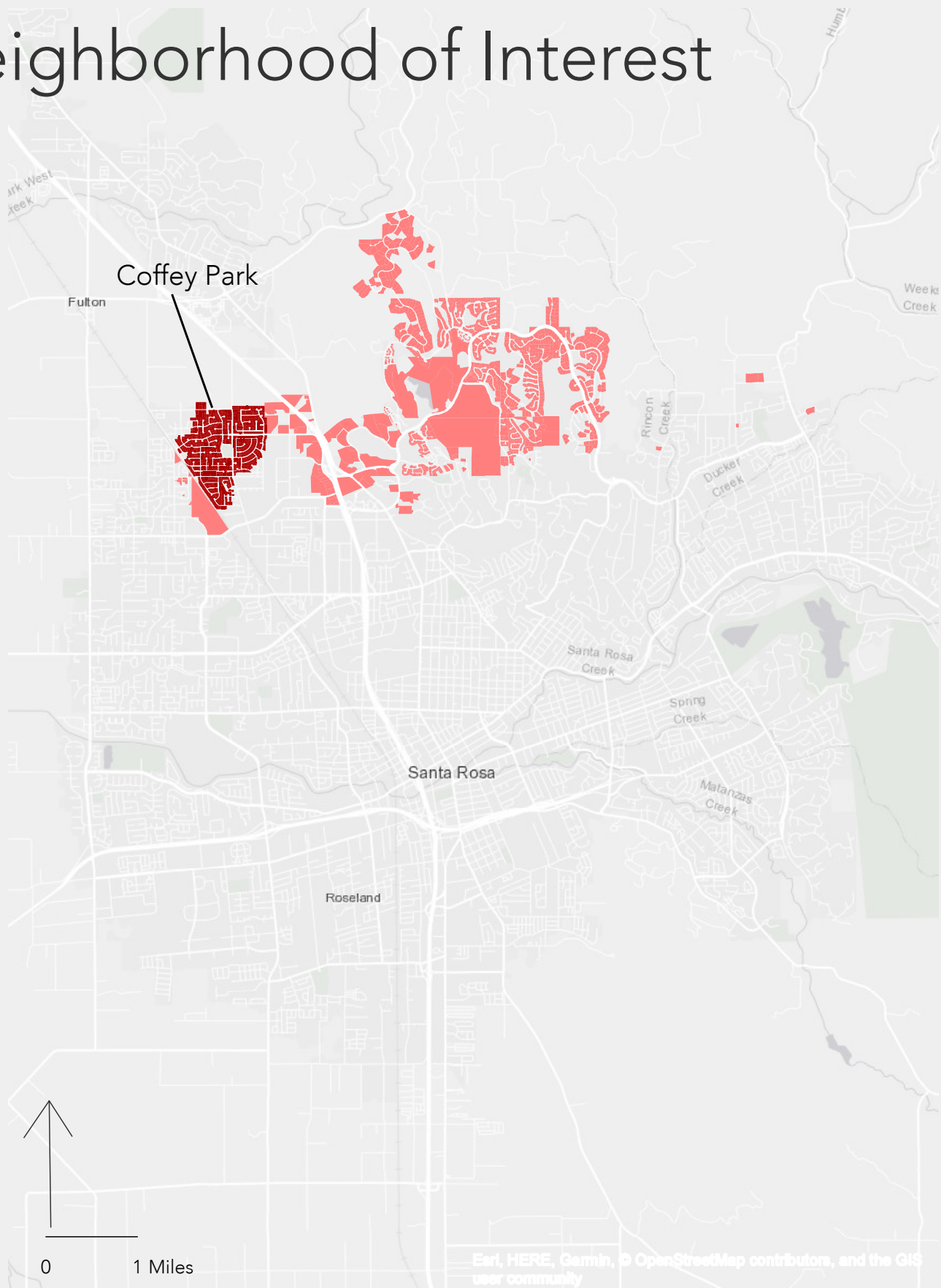
Total Fire Destruction City of Santa Rosa



In the map above, one can see the total burn area for the City of Santa Rosa. It is colored in light red. The data reflects a collective number of some 2,946 structures. This is more than half of the Tubbs Fire destruction. As mentioned previously, the Tubbs Fire destroyed 5,636 structures. On the next page, you will see the separation of the Coffey Park neighborhood from the greater Santa Rosa fire destruction as a bolder red. This denotes the 1304 homes that were lost in one concentrated area.

Area of Interest

Neighborhood of Interest



Creating a Disaster Development Protocol

Because of the amount of structural damage caused by the Tubbs Fire to the greater city of Santa Rosa, the question of “now what” came up over and over again. The community needed a plan and direction on what to do.

To address this issue, a meeting was held with the North Coast Builders Exchange to brainstorm ideas on how to best approach the rebuild process. They knew that with around 6,000 homes total to rebuild, it would be the biggest challenge in Sonoma County’s history. In this meeting, developers from all over the northern Bay Area gathered and discussed how to move forward. At this meeting, it was decided that it would be best to actively engage the fire survivors and let them know they were there to help with the rebuild process.

The first task in the process was to engage FEMA for debris removal with the opt-in or opt-out options. Local Civil Engineering Contractors, Architects, and Engineers were able to give talks to Fire Survivors about the process and explain to them that it was best for them to opt in and have FEMA do the debris removal. Because of these informative talks, 97% of the lots in Coffey were cleaned up within 5 months. The next task was for the different developers interested in rebuilding to come up with their own unique rebuilding programs. Because most of the developers involved in the rebuilding process are more set up to do tract homes and apartments, they encouraged the community to rebuild in mass, which wasn’t exactly what everyone wanted to do since each lot was individually owned. So companies like APM Homes, Inc. made it their goal to provide price complete contracts that provided the best possible price to the Fire Survivor. According to John Allan, Chief Operations Officer of APM Homes, Inc., “our staff worked tirelessly to acquire subcontractors and suppliers who could make this seemingly impossible task possible” (J. Allan, personal communication, August 7, 2018). Information about APM’s program and other programs set up by the different developers was readily made available starting in February at the Rebuild and Recovery Center in Coffey Park.

Despite the challenge of piecing together the different components needed for “spot building”, once the developers were able to make contracts and plans, the city of Santa Rosa has been extremely good about pushing things through the approval process to speed up the rebuild. According to Andy Christopherson of the Synergy Group, another company heavily involved in the rebuild, the city of Santa Rosa has been getting things approved in record time. Currently, once a set of completed plans have been submitted, you’ll have a full permit back in 2-3 weeks. (A. Christopherson, personal communication, August 6, 2018). This is because both the city and county in response to the community’s needs set up the Resilient City Building Department with 3rd party consultants to handle the new onslaught of building applications. However, it is also partially due to the urgency that many city officials feel to rebuild because they lost their own homes as well.


So far, 50% of homeowners in Coffey Park have chosen to rebuild. Those who have not chosen to rebuild, have mainly not done so because of constraints put out by the timeline of construction. Since most insurance policies cap the ALE (additional living expense) at a monetary value or timeline, those who are not in contract now may not make the deadline of next year. They would then be forced to pay a mortgage on their burned lot in addition to wherever they are renting now. For many this is an unaffordable option.

Redevelopment Currently

To make it easier to understand where each individual lot/homeowner is on this process, it has been grouped into the following 6 phases:

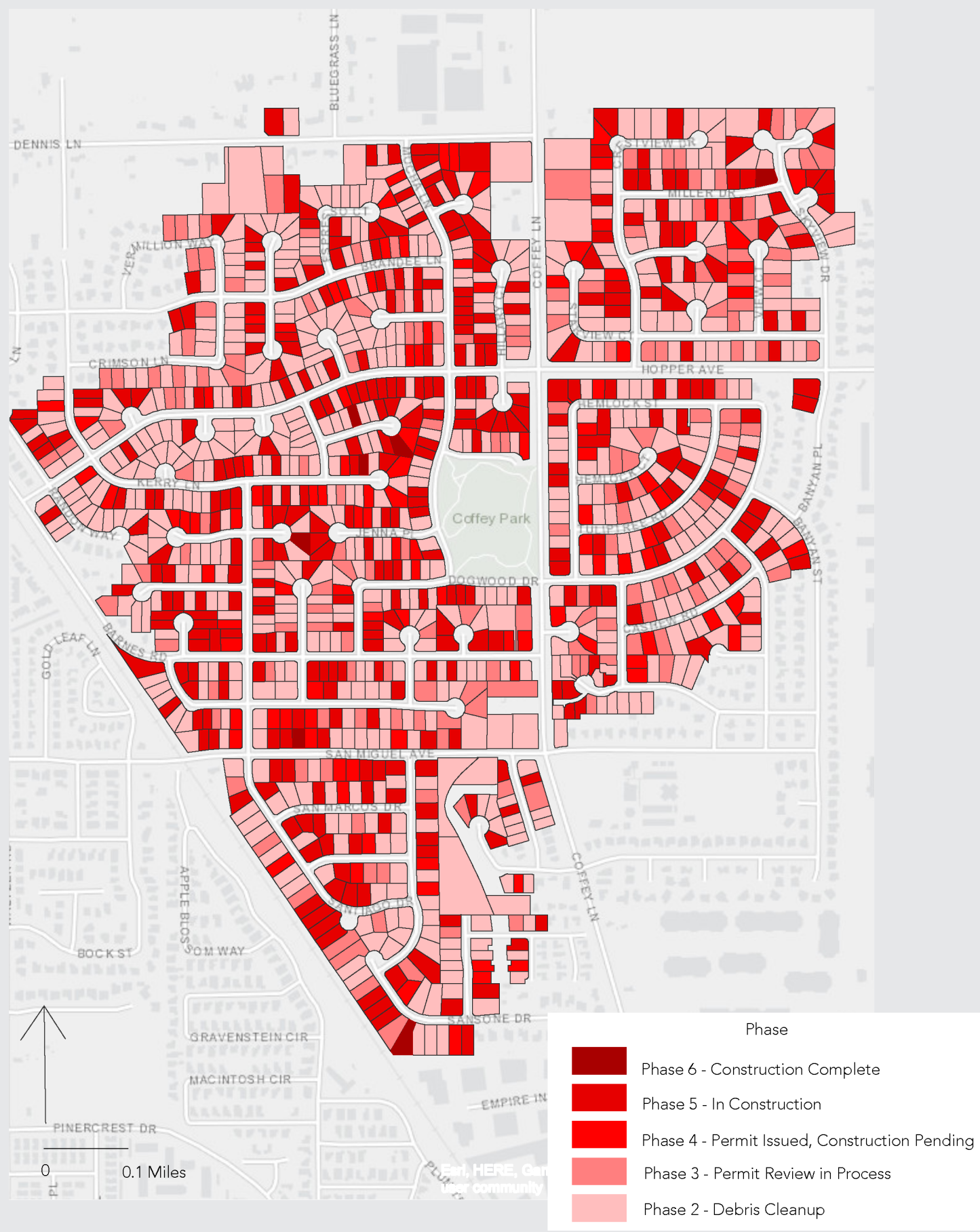
- Phase 1 - Debris Cleanup Not Completed
- Phase 2 - Debris Cleanup Completed
- Phase 3 - Permit Review in Process
- Phase 4 - Permit Issues, Construction Pending
- Phase 5 - In Construction
- Phase 6 - Construction Complete

As of August 5th, 2018, of the 1304 homes destroyed in Coffey Park, 7 homes have been completely rebuilt (Phase 6), 350 are under construction currently (Phase 5), 109 more have permits for construction and are waiting to start (Phase 4), 170 are in the midst of the permit review process (Phase 3), and 600 have completed their debris cleanup (Phase 2). There are currently no more homes in the Phase 1 stage. Of those being rebuilt, 45 are being rebuilt by APM homes and 50 by the Tuxhorn Company.



"...myself and many others made it our goal to make this the most successful mass rebuild in US history"
- John Allan, APM Homes, Inc.

Redevelopment by Phase



Challenges and Success

Challenges

The rebuilding process for those who lost homes in the Coffey Park neighborhood has by no means been easy. One of the challenges that has come into recent attention is the lack of construction workers in the state of California (Hansen, 2018). According to a website called Buildzoom, which connects contractors with property owners, California has lost 20% of its construction workers since 2005. This has led to a delay in the filling of open construction positions of up to 6 weeks.

This lack of skilled labor, has resulted in both rising prices and delays for everyone in the building industry, including those affected by wildfires. With the recent Carr fire and Mendocino complex fire, the number of structures and homes that need to be rebuilt is steadily rising.

Those who are choosing to rebuild their home in Coffey Park and have yet to begin the construction phase of the process may therefore find it difficult to get their house from plans to reality.

Another challenge that will continue to be present into the future is the developer's willingness to work directly with Fire Survivors. Since this is an emotionally taxing experience, it can be difficult to get and keep developers who are willing to deal with the challenges that come with this unique population.

Challenge Mitigation/Resources

Because of the close-knit community present in Santa Rosa, a nonprofit called Coffey Strong has been created to aide in the redevelopment efforts and provide those without a construction or development background with sound information. The website includes a place for community members to compare the different pricing and services offered by the array of builders and contractors they can hire to rebuild their home. It also has information on the insurance settlement process, the mortgage process, financing, councilors, community and charity organizations.

Success: The First Completed Rebuild



Photo by Cornell Barnard of Dan Bradford's home, the first home to be rebuilt in Coffey Park, May 25th, 2018. It is now one of 7 homes in Coffey Park that have completed construction.

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