

My name is Pete Parkinson and I'm here this morning with the perspective of a fire survivor. My family lost our home in the Nuns Fire, which started near the community of Kenwood at around the same time as the Tubbs Fire started in Calistoga and the Atlas Fire started in eastern Napa County. My experience and my comments are also informed by over 35 years as a professional planner. I was the planning director here in Sonoma County from 2002 to 2013 and I was the planning manager for Santa Cruz County at the time of the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989. In 2017 & 2018 I was president of the California Chapter of the American Planning Association. My remarks today are solely my own and not on behalf of any organization or agency.

My wife and I, and our then 9-year old son were asleep the night of October 8, 2017 when I awoke to the smell of smoke and the glow of fire in the distance. We initially evacuated to my wife's mother's home in the Journey's End mobile home park about a quarter mile north of here. We ended up evacuating grandma too and the park was largely destroyed a few hours later by the Tubbs fire. Despite our experience—including losing a home that we loved, nearly all our belongings and one of our two dogs—I consider our family to be incredibly fortunate. We were spared the horrifying experiences that many of our neighbors went through ... rushing out of their homes with their yard already on fire, abandoning their burning cars and striking out on foot, cutting through a barbed wire fence to drive overland with a car full of children when the roads were blocked by fire and falling trees, sheltering-in-place while homes around them burned. Our neighbor across the street died in his home because he could not get out.

In our neighborhood of 130 homes, 92 were destroyed. Just over 1/3 of these are now under construction, including ours. We look forward to moving home sometime this summer, almost 2 years after the fires. But nearly 2/3 of our neighborhood has not yet started rebuilding. Some cannot afford it due to pervasive under-insurance and high construction costs. But many of our neighbors remain traumatized by what they experienced that night and in the weeks and months that followed. This trauma is palpable when you talk with them and it presents a formidable barrier to the focus and decisiveness needed to move forward. Many in our neighborhood—I would say around 25 percent—will not rebuild because they cannot face the additional stress and delay that a lengthy design and construction process entails.

I realize that your Commission is focused primarily on issues of cost and liability. It may seem like my story is only tangentially related to your charge, but my point in raising these issues is that there is a human element in all of this that must factor into your Commission's work, and into all of the efforts that state and local governments are undertaking to manage liability, reduce future risk and make our communities safer. Every community is more than the sum of its physical parts; our communities are our people, with all of our fears, hopes and vulnerabilities. In this regard, I have 2 specific points to emphasize:

First, a catastrophe of this magnitude shines a bright light on the full spectrum weaknesses that any community has in their social and physical infrastructure. One major weakness was apparent from the outset: our communication and alert systems failed us. While this was a systems failure, it was also the result of a wildfire event that totally overwhelmed emergency responders' ability to understand the situation, communicate with one another and with the public, and deploy emergency response resources. Just as an example, after I woke up that night and saw what I saw out my window, I called our local fire district. Their station is about a mile from our house. They said, "yes, we know there's a fire in

Kenwood but we don't think it'll get up your way. You can go back to bed & the Sheriff's office let you know if you need to evacuate." That call never came. This is not just an emergency response issue; the lack of warning and communication increased the damage caused by these fires. It cost lives and property and contributed significantly to community-scale trauma that has a lasting impact on the community and its recovery.

Another community-wide weakness I want to highlight is around housing. Sonoma County was in the midst of a housing crisis before the wildfires, with a vacancy rate around one percent. When 5,300 households are made instantly homeless as a result of our catastrophe, the lack of housing only magnifies the impact of the disaster. There are few things that impact well-being more than losing one's home, and one way that trauma is made worse is when you have few if any good options to shelter your family and loved ones.

My second point is that one powerful and effective way to reduce risk—and the consequent cost and trauma from catastrophic wildfires—is to empower and incentivize individual property owners to take effective steps to reduce their own risk. When we talk about earthquakes we already know that when property owners strengthen foundations and reinforce masonry buildings, it saves lives and property. When it comes to wildfire, we're seeing lots of focus on forest management—or "sweeping" as some might call it—and firebreaks. Without a doubt, these strategies are an essential part of hazard reduction. But we have to remember that the catastrophes here and in the town of Paradise were not "forest fires," per se; these catastrophes were the result of structure fires, largely—but not exclusively—in the wildland-urban interface areas. Since the fires here in Sonoma County many of us have been focused on actions we can take as a community and as individuals to reduce risk, and we've been learning a great deal. Of course, one thing we can do is to stop making things worse by reducing new development in the wildland-urban interface, but we have also been told over and over again by fire behavior professionals that the best way to improve safety is to start at the house and work outward. This means hardening the structure itself to resist ignition, and managing vegetation closest to the home to reduce exposure. Focusing on reducing risk at the individual structure level should be an essential strategy for risk and cost reduction, statewide.

That concludes my testimony.