



# Upper Ridge Community Plan

## *Butte County*

### OVERVIEW

#### REGION

*Northern California*

#### POPULATION

*180,000*

#### TOOL TYPES

*Post-Disaster Recovery Plan,  
Community Plan, Transfer of  
Development Rights (TDR)*

#### IMPLEMENTING AGENCIES

*Planning Department, Fire  
Department*

#### CLIMATE IMPACT AREA

*Wildfire Resilience*

# SUMMARY

In 2018, the Camp Fire burned more than 153,000 acres throughout Butte County, resulting in 85 fatalities. More than 18,000 structures were lost, many in the Town of Paradise and surrounding Upper Ridge communities of Magalia, Concow, and Paradise Pines. Many community members have struggled to rebuild—only 3% of the 4,309 homes in unincorporated Butte County have been rebuilt in the four years since the fire.

Considering the challenges the area faces and to build resilience while fostering long-term recovery, the County has drafted a new plan for the Upper Ridge Community with goals to (1) develop a land use blueprint and policy direction, (2) improve circulation, (3) enhance emergency response and evacuation, (4) promote a resilient, healthy, and fire-safe community, (5) plan for a “vibrant” town-center, and (6) provide enhanced recreational opportunities. This plan is also novel because it explores opportunities such as resilience hubs, temporary areas of refuge, and the potential for a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program in the plan area.

*This case study was selected as a Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Planning Best Practice because it exemplifies a holistic approach toward wildfire resilience planning in the County’s Upper Ridge Community Plan. The case study also highlights an innovative land use strategy (TDR program) to potentially minimize future wildfire risk to the community. Finally, the plan development process incorporated a strong public outreach component despite the challenges associated with long-term displacement of residents following the Camp Fire.*

*Community plans are policy documents that set forth a vision for growth within a defined area, such as a particular community or neighborhood. These plans contain goals, objectives, and programs for implementation to help meet the broad objectives of the general plan. Community plans can integrate fire risk and resiliency into local priorities and may also explore innovative land use planning features to achieve these measures.*

## TOOL DESIGN

The Upper Ridge Community Plan area consists of neighborhoods in unincorporated Butte County: Old Magalia, Central Skyway, Lower Pines, Fir Haven, Carnegie Colter, Steiffer, an area encompassing Nimshew, Humbug, and De Sabla, and Coutolenc. Of the 18,000 structures lost in the Camp Fire, 2,200 were homes located in these unincorporated areas of the Upper Ridge. This loss reflected more than 40% of the plan area’s housing stock and displaced a significant percentage of local residents.

The [new community plan](#) is based on extensive community outreach and provides a vision for building a sustainable and resilient Upper Ridge. Chapters include specific strategies and recommendations for new County policies that would aid in plan implementation. Chapters and specific policies include:



**Land Use and Development:** Strategies in this chapter are primarily focused on rebuilding residential housing lost in the Camp Fire, adding new residential housing options, and attracting new commercial development. Although many of the homes lost in the fire were single-family residential, more diverse housing typologies are needed to meet the growing demand for middle- and low-income housing, including garden apartments, townhouses, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs). This chapter also focuses on ways to (re)build housing in safer locations, such as in areas of easy access for the fire department, near evacuation routes, or near communication centers.

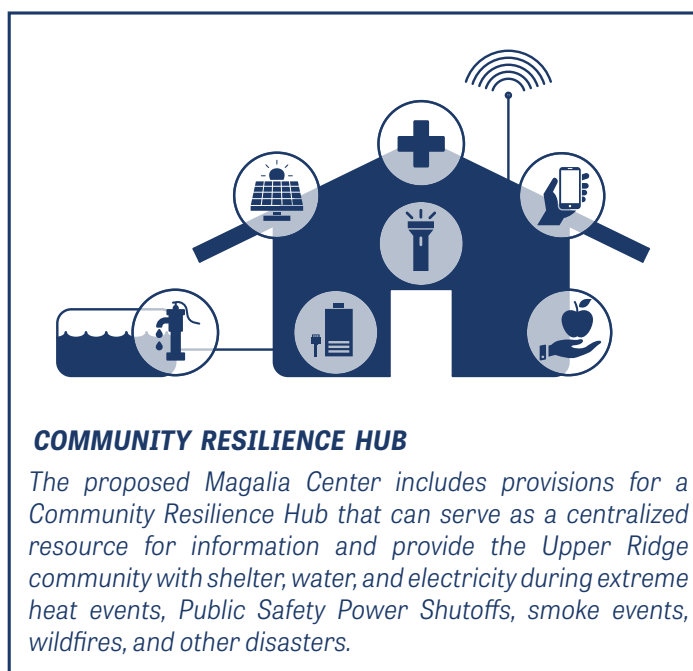
**Magalia Center:** One major outcome of the community outreach process was a need to create a vibrant place for residents to gather, shop, and live. The plan provides a proposed starting point for a revitalized Magalia Center, already home to the Magalia Community Center and Community Park, that would serve the entire Upper Ridge Community. Potential development opportunities include a community garden, resilience hub (as further discussed in the plan's Resiliency chapter), and a "town square" for larger community gatherings.

**Parks, Recreation, and Open Space:** This chapter identifies opportunities to enhance existing parks and open spaces and propose new recreational amenities in the Upper Ridge, including a proposed Upper Ridge Connector Trail that would provide a cohesive trail network across the entire plan area. This chapter also discusses ways that parks can increase fire safety, such as ensuring regular maintenance of wildfire risk reduction buffers and identifying areas that can serve as temporary areas of refuge for community members who are unable to evacuate during a wildfire.

**Circulation:** This chapter proposes multi-modal mobility improvements for general circulation and identifies ways to improve the road system in the Upper Ridge Plan Area to increase evacuation options for residents during future wildfire events. Three of the main strategies for evacuation improvements include: (1) forming an evacuation task force to evaluate the five potential

new evacuation routes identified in the plan, (2) prioritizing near-term roadway improvements, and (3) developing a comprehensive evacuation network.

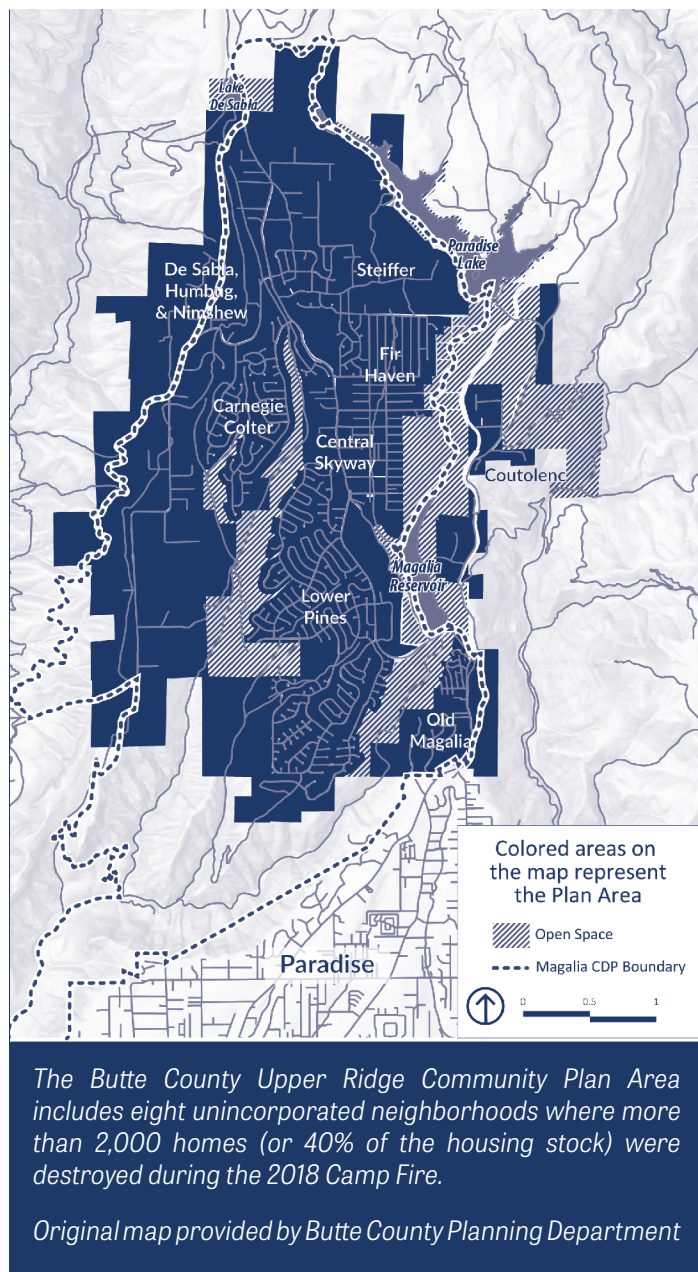
**Resiliency:** Although resiliency is a major theme throughout the entire plan, this chapter focuses on hazard risk and trends on the Upper Ridge, disaster response capabilities and designs, and strategies to increase resiliency to drought, extreme heat, wildfire, flooding, seismic and geologic hazards, human health hazards, and more. The chapter contains individual strategies unique to specific hazards, overarching disaster preparedness and response strategies, such as developing a comprehensive emergency communications program and procedures for emergencies, and strategies to create physical



and virtual "community resilience hubs" that provide everyday services and help the community prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

**Utility Infrastructure:** Utility infrastructure in the Upper Ridge Plan area includes water, wastewater, stormwater, power, and communications. This chapter discusses ongoing considerations for property owners that are rebuilding from the Camp Fire and provides strategies to improve

service and delivery of utilities in the plan area. A major theme is the need to build resiliency and redundancy into the system to account for potential disruptions during emergencies, such as utilizing solar and battery storage for power during outages.



## IMPLEMENTATION

The Upper Ridge Community Plan has a chapter on Implementation that focuses on how the County will prioritize, fund, and implement plan strategies.

The chapter includes an implementation matrix that provides information on who the responsible party is, the timing, and the estimated cost of each recommended strategy. The chapter also provides a comprehensive list of potential funding opportunities, ranging from local sources to state and federal grant opportunities for strategies outlined in each chapter.

Another component of the plan's Implementation Chapter is a discussion on consistency and alignment with other planning efforts, both existing and in progress, including the County's General Plan update and Zoning Ordinance. County planning staff intend to include strategies first introduced in the Upper Ridge Plan in their new General Plan by reference. They may also adopt Upper Ridge Plan strategies as General Plan Policies and Guidance to further align planning outcomes. In addition, some of the proposed strategies in the Upper Ridge Community Plan will also be reflected in an update to the Butte County Zoning Ordinance, particularly in and around Magalia Center, where there is an opportunity for commercially zoned parcels to be transformed into mixed-use development.

## COLLABORATION & ENGAGEMENT

The County undertook an extensive community outreach campaign to garner input on the future of the Upper Ridge. This process was complicated by both the large number of persons displaced from the Camp Fire that currently do not live in the area and the COVID-19 pandemic that limited the opportunity for in-person community workshops and meetings. To address these challenges, the County worked on a comprehensive digital and print campaign that included developing a project webpage, electronic media outreach through social media and email, and mailing information to area residents.

The County also hosted four community workshops to: (1) better understand the issues





*The fourth, and final, Upper Ridge Plan Community Workshop was held in person, allowing residents to interact with each other and planning staff to share feedback on the final plan concepts.*

*Image: Butte County Planning Department.*

and opportunities, (2) undertake a community visioning process, (3) provide an opportunity for the County to share initial concepts, and (4) share final plan concepts. The four community workshops were held mostly remotely; however, the fourth (and final) workshop was hosted in-person during a period of low local COVID-19 transmission rates.

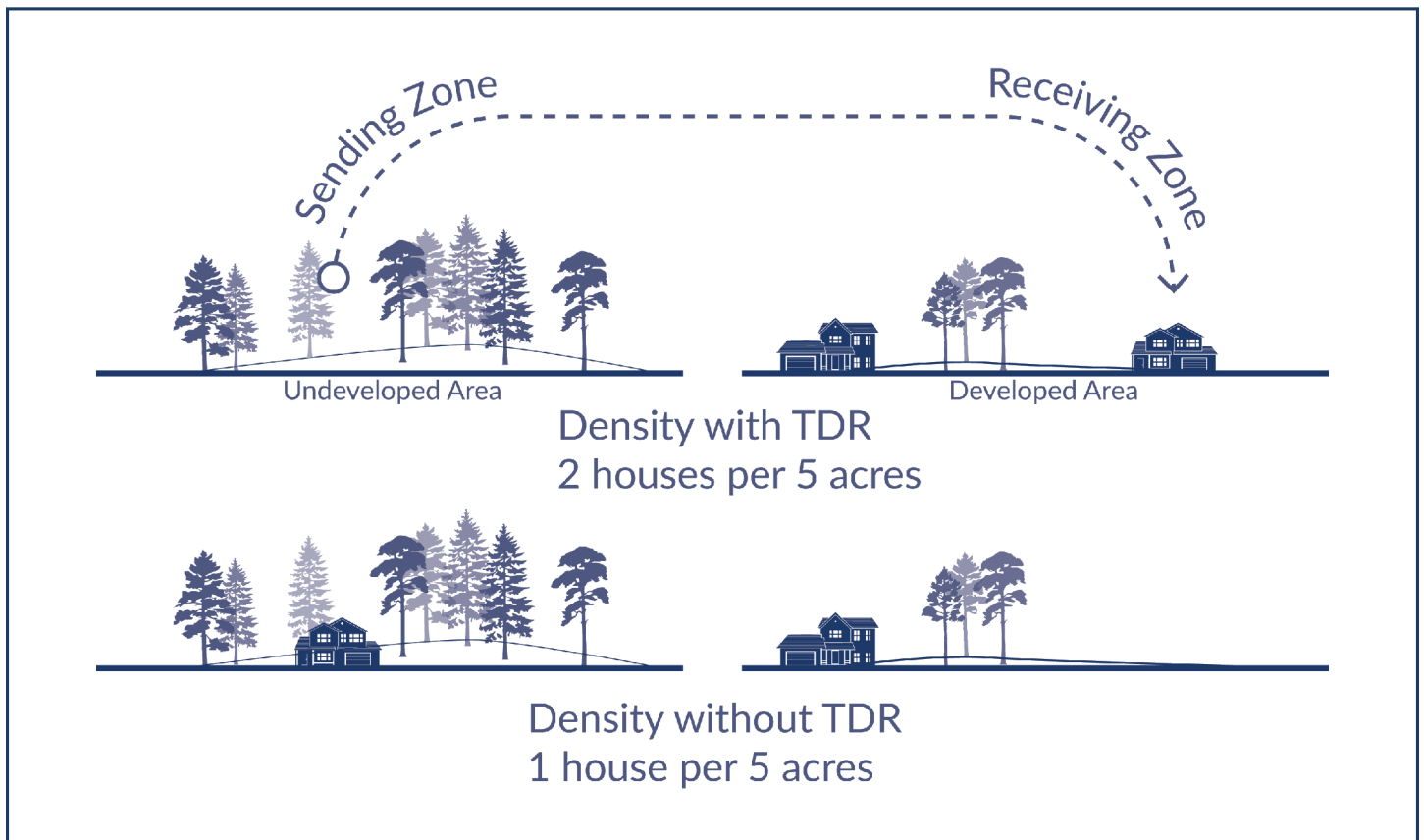
After the fourth community meeting, the County adapted feedback into a survey that was shared online for greater response opportunities. Priorities from the series of community workshops and surveys were incorporated into the plan.

## INNOVATIONS

Butte County completed a feasibility analysis and evaluated the potential for utilizing a voluntary TDR program in the Land Use and Development Chapter of the Upper Ridge Community Plan. A

local TDR program for the plan area could shift the location of new housing from parcels with high wildfire hazard to already developed areas that are less susceptible to wildfire based on an analysis of potential fire behavior and wildfire risk. This would ideally create open space areas, or “buffers,” that could be more easily managed to reduce wildfire hazards through vegetation management and uninterrupted fuel treatments. The concept received general support from the community, as long as it could be accomplished in an efficient and streamlined manner.

The plan outlines a potential path forward for establishing overlay zones for unsafe sending sites (areas where landowners can trade or sell rights to develop housing based on specific criteria) and receiving sites that could accommodate a higher density of housing. An analysis completed for the community plan found that the most likely opportunity for a successful TDR program would be to allow increased density on lots zoned as Rural Residential with a minimum parcel area of five acres (RR-5) in or near developed parts



*Above Image: A visual representation of what a TDR program may look like, including density of both the sending and receiving sites before and after TDR is implemented.*

of the county. A TDR program could allow two houses per five acres instead of one in more developed areas, thus preserving outlying lots as undeveloped and making these areas available for vegetation management and fuel breaks.

The analysis is somewhat limited because the real estate and development markets have not fully recovered to normal, or a new normal since the Camp Fire. In addition, there is volatility in the cost of construction materials resulting from production slowdowns during the pandemic and the ongoing logistics and supply chain disruptions.

## FUNDING SOURCE

The North Valley Community Foundation provided a \$250,000 grant for the Butte County Planning Department to develop the Upper Ridge Community Plan. The North Valley Community

Foundation has provided more than \$35 million in grants through the [Butte Strong Fund](#) to support the recovery of communities impacted by the Camp Fire, including [\\$4.2 million](#) directly to Butte County.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

### REPLICABILITY

For communities considering drafting community plans in areas recovering from wildfire disaster, Butte County's Upper Ridge Community Planning process offers several key insights:

1. *Broad outreach, including mailers and social media campaigns, are essential for reaching a population that may not currently reside in their homes. Many of the residents in the*



*Upper Ridge Plan area currently do not live in the area due to home loss or feelings of isolation post-fire. However, Butte County worked to reach out to as many residents (current and former) as possible.*

2. *Consider the feasibility of innovative land use planning tools that can increase resilience in the future, such as resilience hubs and TDR programs.*
3. *Linking community plans with General Plan policies and Zoning Ordinances can further advance strategies and recommendations for policy changes needed to implement plan priorities.*

## **RESPONDING TO DATA, STATE REGULATIONS, & CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS**

California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment Sacramento Valley Regional Report indicates there may be an increase in wildfire activity in the region, which includes Butte County, in response to cycles of drought followed by extreme precipitation (and vice versa). An increase in

rain during the winter and early spring months, followed by an extremely dry summer and fall months may contribute to an excess of dry, dead vegetation that can contribute to extreme fire behavior.

The report also acknowledges that rural and forested communities, like those in the Upper Ridge, are exposed to greater fire risk with climate change and that rural development in high fire risk areas can increase surface and groundwater demand and depletion and extend electric utility lines that can lead to fires. Strategies within the Upper Ridge Community Plan that promote urban infill development and provide housing for diverse groups can help build resilience to climate change and the potential for increased wildfires in Butte County.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

*For more information about the Butte County Upper Ridge Community Plan, please visit the [project website](#).*

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*This case study is part of a series of Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Planning Best Practices. Each case study focuses on a specific planning tool (or set of tools) that a community is utilizing to reduce risk and build resilience to wildfire across the state of California. This project is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment – particularly in disadvantaged communities.*

