

SUSTAINABLE LIFE »SERENDIPITY: SUSTAINABLE LIVING IN FIRE AREAS REVISITED

Serendipity: Sustainable Living in Fire Areas Revisited

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We have to make decisions with our eyes open, the best available facts before us — and humility.



The effects of living in a high fire area can be devastating. The recent Tea Fire destroyed 210 homes and scorched the earth in its path. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

Last month I began the [Serendipity column](#), “In the long run, living in a high fire area isn’t sustainable. But I’m living in the short run, which put me in the path of the Tea Fire.” A responder named “Good Point” quickly challenged with, “Living in a high fire area isn’t sustainable. It was (and is) poor city planning to allow all these homes to be located in

the high fire area. The odds are that each house will burn to the ground once every 20 years. I just can't believe that anyone is so stupid as to subject themselves to go through this nightmare. A very poor choice when buying property!"

In fact, I agree with some of "Good Point's" points, if not his vitriolic tone. If I were Santa Barbara's environment czar, I'd be tempted to draw a red line not far above Foothill Road and proclaim that, henceforth, no structures could be built (or rebuilt) above it.



Most mountain homeowners, including my husband and me, pay a high premium in fire costs. It doesn't approach the actual public costs of fighting a fire; however, fires still have to be contained before they reach the city. Maybe we're just sacrificial lambs for the lowlanders!

Nevertheless, what's really unsustainable is the absolutism that "Good Point" espouses. Even something as seemingly straightforward as zoning is squishy in the details. For example, California is overdue for a monster earthquake, something on the order of 8 on the [Richter scale](#). Maybe no one should be allowed to live in California. Even if the Big One hits far offshore, we face the possibility of a deadly tsunami like [the one that killed more than 200,000 living beside the Indian Ocean just two years ago](#). Maybe no one should be allowed to live below an elevation of 50 feet or more — a tsunami zone that might displace 1 billion people or more.

Even if we aren't victims of an earthquake or a tsunami, climate change surely will inundate much of Santa Barbara's downtown with seawater. A recent art project that planned to paint a blue line downtown, where the new shoreline will be, was scuttled as an "inconvenient truth."

Climate change notwithstanding, geographers and food scientists tell us we should all live in the foothills, to save the fertile plains for agriculture. This would be especially true in our county, with some of the most fertile soil on Earth.

We have to make decisions with our eyes open, the best available facts before us and mixing in large doses of humility. It's imperative to elect officials who will make decisions that are best for the community, not for themselves or their friends.

One fact they surely will not find is one espoused by “Good Point,” that each house will burn every 20 years. Climate records suggest that the natural fire cycle in Santa Barbara is 20 years to 40 years, but the odds are quite low for any one fire-area home to burn in any one fire.

If you're in the nonenviable position of owning one of the 210 destroyed homes and you plan to rebuild, check out the [Community Environmental Council's](#) Web site at www.communityenvironmentalcouncil. The site features a home on West Mountain, which was surrounded by fire and did not burn. The owners designed with an eye to green building and fire impenetrability. It worked. Given environmental and fire-safe guidelines, living in the foothills can be sustainable.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.canyonvoices.com.