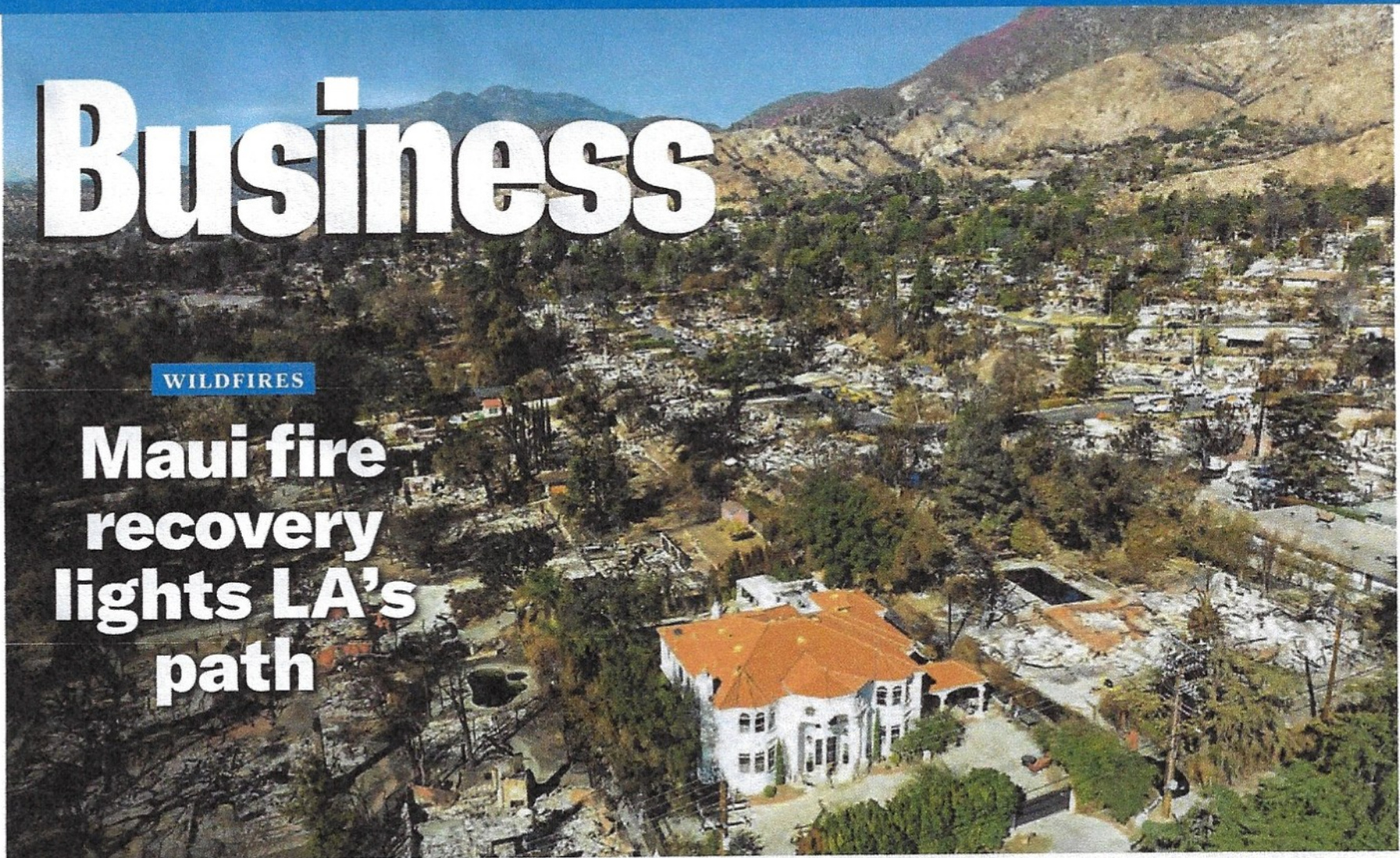


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Maui fire recovery lights LA's path



A lone home stands among residences leveled by the Eaton Fire in Altadena, California on Jan. 21.

The Hawaiian island's slow recovery from major blazes points to challenges ahead for Southern California

By John Scott Lewinski

With the largest of the multiple Los Angeles-area wildfires finally contained and residents of the devastated Pacific Palisades and Altadena communities able to return and sift through the ashes of their lost homes, the final cost of the Southern California blazes is still not known. From the *Los Angeles Times* to the BBC, news outlets estimate a crushing price tag surging as high as \$275 billion.

In the flames' aftermath, while President Donald Trump argues with Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass about resident access and safety problems, Gov. Gavin Newsom (D-CA) spars with local and national media about his state's failures to prepare for and fight the fires. The whirlwind of grief and anger howls as debates on when, how, and where to begin rebuilding the scorched neighborhoods start in earnest.

If California residents seek a microcosm of the challenges Los Angeles will face as the city recovers, they could look to Maui and the island's struggles to re-establish the historic city of Lahaina. A fast-moving August 2023 blaze leveled that town, and little progress was made in the subsequent 18 months in getting the majority of its displaced residents back home.

Elle Cochran, a Democratic state representative in Hawaii, whose district includes West Maui and Lahaina, urges Angelenos to study the Maui disaster response as a model of what not to do in the months and years to come. While she acknowledges the more than \$5 billion financial wound of the Maui fire can't match LA's troubles, Cochran reports that the island loses an additional \$40 million in taxes and other revenue for every year the Lahaina rebuild languishes without a clear plan.

"I feel like the money that already came to us to rebuild could've been spent wiser," Cochran said. "We could've been much deeper into rebuilding and recovery. I think the No. 1 error made here was the first amount of FEMA money went to temporary shelters and not permanent housing."

According to Federal Emergency Management Agency reports, \$3 billion in U.S. money went to Maui in the year following the fire. That funding included \$56.1 million to help 7,141 people recover through the Individual Assistance Program, including more than \$33.8 million for housing assistance. An additional \$37.3 million went to locals in need of rental assistance.

In her criticism of temporary over permanent solutions, Cochran refers to Ka La'i Ola and Kilohana. The former is a development looking to house as many as 1,500 survivors for the next five years. Kilohana is a FEMA-built housing site of 167 shelter units for eligible survivors. According to FEMA, "The manufactured units will allow homeowners to live on their property while making repairs to their disaster-damaged home."

Cochran insists that the amount of invested FEMA aid could've gone to re-

building the more than 680 lost properties belonging to homeowners native to the area for generations.

"None of those new permanent houses have started," Cochran said. "With all of that FEMA money going to temporary, cubicle-style housing, there's no plan for how to rebuild the permanent homes. That original investment of FEMA money is gone, and we're no closer to rebuilding families' permanent spaces, businesses, or services — truly rebuilding Lahaina."

She places responsibility for how the initial FEMA money was spent on Gov. Josh Green (D-HI) and Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen. Requests for comment from the mayor's office were not returned as of press time.

However, Makana McClellan, Green's director of communications, offered the following statement:

"The Governor's wildfire and affordable housing emergency proclamations both have language to accelerate building on Maui. State agencies continue to convene regularly to monitor and review state regulations."

McClellan pointed to elements of Green's January State of the State address, in which he announced the investment of more than \$2 billion in federal disaster relief and \$800 million in state funds to support survivors and rebuild communities. Without in-depth specifics, Green also ensured long-term housing for 99% of displaced residents through "innovative interim and permanent housing projects."

"The Governor is also enhancing statewide wildfire prevention measures, including deploying early alert sensors, reestablishing the State Fire Marshal office, and increasing its funding by \$2.2 million," McClellan reported.

Back on Maui, Cochran confesses a growing concern that Lahaina will never be rebuilt in any sense similar to its former self the longer its residents remain in temporary shelter. She expects families unable to wait out the rebuilding process will move and older residents unable to afford modern Hawaii housing costs will abandon their ancestral lands.

"We're not seeing efforts by the governor and the mayor to cut the bureaucracy," she added. "We're grateful that there

will be more federal funding coming, but there's still no guarantee that money will go to rebuilding Lahaina. I have yet to see any plan presented as to how that next wave of funding will be spent."

In a worst-case scenario, she hints at worries of a long game in which big resort and condo developers prey on the impatience of displaced residents to buy them out in favor of building revenue-generating properties. That's a concern simmering back in Pacific Palisades and Altadena as burned-out single-family homeowners wonder if that town will ever be rebuilt in any way similar to what it was.

Kimberly Aboltin is a Los Angeles resident, longtime activist, and former member of the Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council. She now finds herself helping homeowners hit by the Pacific Palisades and Altadena infernos as those panicked locals come to her for advice on whom to speak to or what resources might be available as they scramble to find shelter or to return to their burned-out properties.

Aboltin describes a chaotic scene in and out of the fire zones as LA's early efforts to aid fire victims cause more confusion than peace of mind.

"People are still in shock here," Aboltin said. "There's a sense of anxiety and surliness. That's partly because traffic is now terrible with portions of freeways and major streets still closed — and the air still has a metallic taste that makes it difficult to be outside. But, the main reason I think everyone is on edge is because so many people don't know what's happening in the burned-out neighborhoods."

Aboltin notes that almost a month after the conflagration began, there's no clear path forward for allowing all homeowners and residents back to the ruins, cleaning the debris from the Palisades, reducing the red tape around building permits, or estimating how low any of those elements will require.

"The assumption is neighborhoods like the Palisades or Altadena will never be rebuilt the way they were," Aboltin added. "There's a feeling that leadership is failing the people and a constant question of exactly who is going to rebuild these neighborhoods hangs over everything."

On the Hawaii side, Warren Freeland is a Maui commercial real estate broker, and his family was the longtime owners of the Pioneer Inn, a Maui hospitality mainstay lost in the Lahaina blaze. Working with Front Street Recovery, a grassroots Maui rebuilding effort, he tries to stay positive and believes the town and the hotel can be reborn. Still, 18 months of very little progress wears on him.

"Our government made temporary accommodations for some of the home builders, and we're grateful for that," Freeland said, "but we're advocating for rebuilding our historic community as a whole. While there is some homebuilding going on, no other aspects of the community are coming back at this time. Our county has been unable to handle that process yet, and it was obstructive in the first year. But, we're seeing more cooperation now. They say they're trying to come up with 'a process to process' the building permits." *

Citing the lack of a clear path forward at the 18-month mark, Freeland once hoped for executive orders from the governor's office to expedite rebuilding efforts. Those never came.

"We're working on changing laws on the local level to accommodate (the rebuilding process)," Freeland added. "Our mayor and county governments say they're committed to rebuilding Lahaina, and we're hoping to see some traction on that, but we're still a long way away." *

For displaced Los Angeles residents looking to avoid the same housing limbo that many of Maui's people face, Cochran urges Californians to apply pressure on Newsom to remove permit delays. More importantly, she warns them to keep a close eye on where and how federal disaster funding gets spent.

"There was a community meeting where local nonprofits presented their plan to use incoming funds to manage a new development on state-owned lands to rebuild a portion of Lahaina," Cochran said, "but they set the completion date for 2029. The people here can't wait that long, and I have to push because it's not acceptable." ★

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