

Rebuilding not an easy decision



An Army Corps of Engineers worker clears debris Monday from a home destroyed in the Eaton fire in Altadena, Calif. The Army Corps has an estimated 4.5 million tons of debris to clear from the fires. MARIO TAMA — GETTY IMAGES

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ALTADENA, Calif.>> The first time Dan Grebow returned to Altadena to pick through the rubble of his family's home, he felt a strong pull to rebuild.

After all, it had been his home for 15 years. Grebow and his wife, Carmina, fixed it up together. And it was where their three young children had started their lives.

But when Grebow began navigating the labyrinth of insurance, mortgage payments and temporary housing, the variables overwhelmed him: How long would it take to rebuild? How much would it cost? Would the house be insurable in the future? Would it be safe for him and his family?

Across Altadena, where thousands of homes were destroyed in January by the Eaton fire, residents are grappling with the difficult question of whether to stay and rebuild — or leave for good.

Their decisions will determine the future of a neighborhood that generations of families have cherished as an emblem of middle-class prosperity in the bucolic foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains.

As of this past week, more than 60 burned properties in Altadena have been listed for sale since the fires, according to data collected by Jim Tripodes, a local real estate agent. Nine have sold, and 17 others are in escrow, the data shows. Sale prices have ranged from \$520,000 to \$790,000.

Many homeowners are finding that insurance will not cover the full cost of rebuilding the structures they had, especially in an inflated market where materials and builders are in high demand. Exhausted by a frantic evacuation and weeks of living in temporary housing, some believe it would be easier to sell their land and buy a home elsewhere than to wait for construction to finish in Altadena.

"The list of things that we were concerned about with rebuilding just seemed to grow," Grebow said. "I think there's a lot more uncertainty in the numbers for rebuilding."

The prospect of longtime residents leaving Altadena for good has alarmed some community members, who fear that an exodus would open the door for developers to buy land and reshape the local character.

It was a place where middle-class Black families established strong neighborhood bonds decades ago, where Angelenos could find beautiful, affordable single-family homes and where Latino immigrants found community. It was known for its eclectic mix of Craftsman and midcentury modern homes and its small-town feel. Now, all of that is in question.

At the same time that residents were struggling to make the rebuilding math work, text messages began arriving on residents' phones offering all-cash payments for their land.

In response, a movement called Altadena Not For Sale has crystallized in the weeks since the fire.

Besides demonstrating, the group has been educating uninsured and underinsured residents on their rights and encouraging them not to sell their land under pressure, said Melissa Michelson, who has helped organize Altadena Not For Sale. "It represents the idea that we're not moving, we're not selling, that we're strong as a community," she said.

And in Santa Rosa, Calif., there were similar questions over whether to rebuild after more than 3,000 homes were destroyed in a 2017 wind-swept blaze.

"I think that the biggest concern up front is the concern of the unknown," said Gabe Osburn, director of planning and economic development in Santa Rosa. "You just don't know how it's going to come back." *

Ultimately, Osburn said, zoning regulations prevented developers from building denser housing, and those who chose to rebuild helped form an even tighter community.

After wrestling with the decision, Grebow and his wife chose to list their home in mid-February. They wept when the listing went live.

In just a few days, the Grebows' home attracted three offers. The lot, which they had listed at \$549,000, was set to sell for about \$30,000 above asking price.

But the buyer pulled out, and the Grebows again found themselves pondering their next steps. They have gotten new offers in recent days for about \$100,000 less than what the home had been set to sell for. The couple was not sure what to do.

"We saw this window that maybe we could get as close to being back to where we were as possible," Grebow said.
"Now, I feel like that window has closed."

