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# LOCAL

BURNED: 'THIS WON'T BE THE LAST TIME'

## OLD FIRE'S SCARS



MARK ZALESKI/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Ernest Garcia, 77, of San Bernardino, lost his 3,700-square-foot hillside home in the Old Fire three years ago, but he was able to retrieve some burnt items, which he framed and displayed in his new home.

### *Fears, empty lots linger three years after fatal blaze*

BY DARRELL R. SANTSCHI  
AND CHRIS RICHARD  
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

**C**indy LeClair looked out from her newly rebuilt home in the Del Rosa neighborhood of north San Bernardino and saw clouds of reddish brown smoke billowing from the Esperanza Fire 15 miles away.

"The Santa Anas keep coming and there are people out there who are pyromaniacs," she said by phone in a nervous-sounding voice. "The emotional thing is the hardest. I have a fear that this

won't be the last time."

Three years ago last week, the Old Fire roared through her neighborhood on its way to scorching 91,281 acres in the mountains, foothills and flatlands of San Bernardino County. Left in its wake were six deaths, 976 destroyed homes and 60,000 evacuated people.

In Del Rosa, a mixture of city and unincorporated territory, the fire incinerated more than 500 houses, including LeClair's. The community still shows the physical and emotional scars.

"Three hundred houses burned down"

in the city's portion of Del Rosa, fellow El Camino Drive victim Marcey Stanton said, "and there are 300 different stories to tell."

Like her neighbor, Stanton rebuilt her home. Two of seven lots on the block remain vacant.

Some residents quickly rebuilt. Others moved away. Still others want to rebuild, but are mired in stricter building codes and battles with their insurance companies.

Many were underinsured and can't afford to rebuild, she said.

See **OLD FIRE/B8**

## OLD FIRE

CONTINUED FROM B1

At least 25 people have filed lawsuits to recover their damages, said Lila Hayes, of San Diego, who helped organize the Old Fire Recovery Group after the Modesto Drive house where she grew up, and where her mother lived, was consumed.

The group served as a clearinghouse for fire victims frantic for information. It held weekly meetings in the first year after the fire. The meeting schedule gradually slowed. Its Web site ([www.oldfirerecovery-group.org](http://www.oldfirerecovery-group.org)) remains, but the group disbanded a year ago.

San Bernardino building official Joe Lease said 330 homes were destroyed within the city limits, of which 153 have been rebuilt and 82 are under construction.

San Bernardino County officials did not return phone calls seeking information. Hayes said her organization's count in the neighborhood's unincorporated areas was 229 destroyed homes, of which 99 have been rebuilt. At least 82 residents have not yet applied for permits to rebuild, she said.

Ninety-four Del Rosa lots have been sold since the fire, Hayes said.

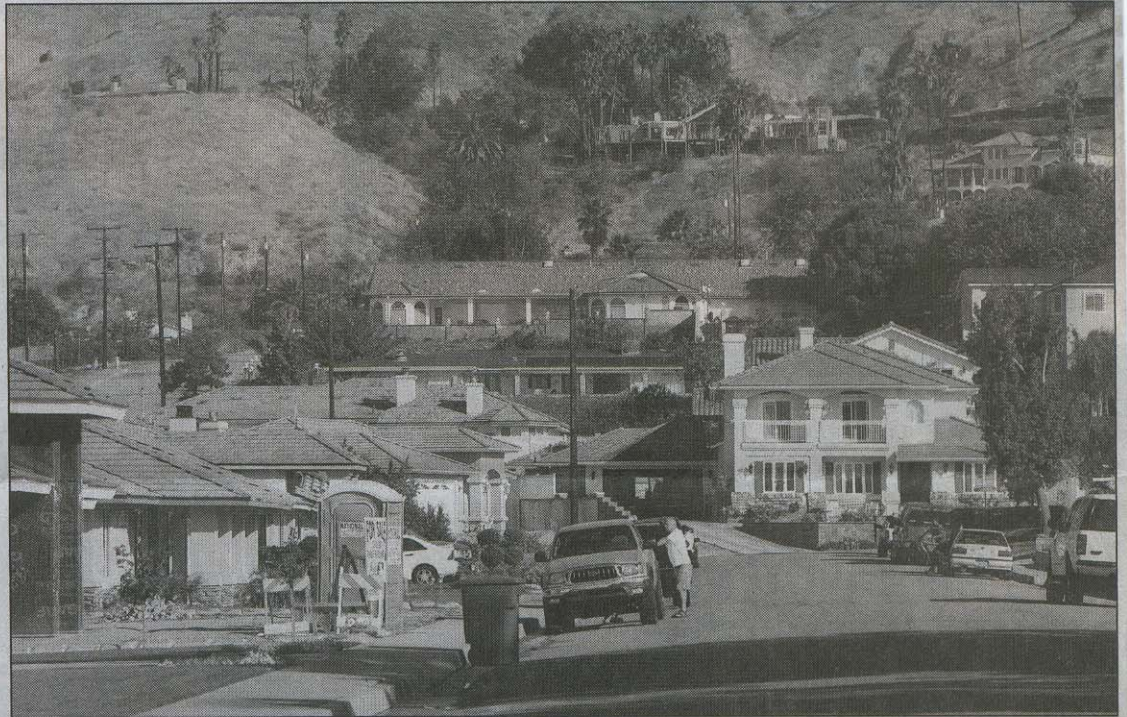
To ease the financial loss and speed recovery, city leaders waived the usual fees for property owners who rebuilt, even if the new structure was bigger and costlier than the original.

San Bernardino City Manager Fred Wilson said that might have been a bigger break for insurance companies than property owners, since most coverage requires the insurer to pay the fees on top of any damage settlement.

Planning officials and building inspectors expedited the approval process for building plans in the area, Development Services Director Valerie Ross said. Typically, city reviews can take four to six weeks.

For Old Fire victims, the process takes five working days, Ross said.

City Councilman Neil Derry,



MARK ZALESKI/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Many homes on Dwight Way in San Bernardino were destroyed during the Old Fire and have been rebuilt. The fire resulted in six deaths, 976 destroyed homes and the evacuation of about 60,000 people in San Bernardino County.

who represents most of the neighborhood that burned, called such consideration not only common decency, but common sense.

"We want people to rebuild and to be participants in the community, and they really can't do that while they're rebuilding. An empty lot doesn't provide any tax revenue. People probably aren't going to be shopping in local stores as much if they don't live here," he said.

Regulations aimed at preventing future disasters like the Old Fire still are under review.

Within months of the fire, the City Council adopted building standards that ban wood shake roofs, require tempered glass or double-pane windows and require wooden fences to be at least 5 feet from houses.

Ross said the city now prohibits its wood fences in a high-hazard area along the northern edge of the city.

But officials stopped short of restrictions that the California Fire Chiefs Association recommended on flammable vegetation such as oleander, and euca-

lyptus, junipers, cypress and olive trees. Even Mexican palms, whose crowns burst into flames and shot downwind in a phenomenon that Lease likened to Roman candles, were allowed to remain.

Evelyn Alexander, president of the 400-member Del Rosa Neighborhood Action Group, pleaded with the city to make sure that the same reconstruction rules apply in both city and county areas.

"I don't think it has happened," she said.

Her Verde Drive home was singed by the fire.

"Three years later, as a very minor victim, the thing that bothers me is that some of the homes are in, but no landscaping," she said. "Some of the houses were half built, but then stopped because, I am assuming, a lack of funds."

The Old Fire destroyed the 3,700-square-foot hillside home of Ernest Garcia, 77, the retired Cal State San Bernardino education college dean. It wiped out his vinyl record collection, a library of books assembled over a lifetime, his hand-signed mod-

ern art and watercolor art collection and 27 mature olive trees.

After being evacuated, he stood on a nearby street and watched as the tops of palm trees burst into flames, broke loose and were turned into flaming missiles by 60 mph winds before crashing onto the roof of his house. The roof didn't catch fire, but the embers were sucked through vents into his attic.

"I watched my house implode," he said.

Still, he considers himself lucky.

Garcia's insurance company paid up immediately, for everything, and he has rebuilt a cozier, 3,100-square-foot house with a library and art studio. He framed some of the burned collectibles and held an Old Fire art show for 100 of his friends in his new home.

"I titled it 'From the Ashes,'" he said. "It was a therapeutic kind of thing. Accept what happened and here are the remains. Move on."

Reach Darrell R. Santschi at 909-806-3067 or [dsantschi@PE.com](mailto:dsantschi@PE.com)