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CAL FIRE-BUTTE COUNTY

FIREFIIGHTERS: BUILD DEFENSIBLE SPACE



NATALIE HANSON — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

Although the access road has thick overgrown brush and trees, this residence's owner has created lots of distance between the home and vegetation, as seen Monday north of Chico.

'Too much potential for it to go bad,' fire captain says

By **Natalie Hanson**
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What firefighters are warning is likely to be a brutal fire season due to drought and climate change is requiring even urban homeowners in Butte County to prepare their homes, if they can. Fire Capt. John Gaddie, who helps manage public information for Cal Fire-Butte County, demonstrated a variety of homes around the county Monday which have worked on hardening and defensible space — and

plenty of others which are concerning for firefighters.

The time is late May, when high winds have already led to burn bans, and very few days remain for property owners to safely remove weeds and get vegetation down. The potential for destructive wildland urban interface fires like the Camp Fire are of special concern where residences sprawl out into grasslands or near canyons and thick forest.

Cal Fire Incident Fire Behavior
FIRE » PAGE 6



Cal Fire-Butte County Fire Capt. John Gaddie said Monday he's impressed with a home in Cohasset that is seated near a canyon for the effort done to keep the property clear and practicing defensible space.

UNIVERSITY POLICE DEPARTMENT

Chico State to examine policing policies

University president to release new policies ahead of fall semester

By **Justin Couchot**
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CHICO » After nearly seven months of collaboration and consideration, a Chico State task force has laid out five themes and a “cornerstone recommendation” for the University Police Department.

Members of the Chico State Presidential Task Force to Examine University Police Policies and Practices released its final report and recommendations Monday to Chico State President Gayle Hutchinson and members of the Chico community.

The task force was created by Hutchinson after Chico State's former Police Chief John Reid retired at the end of May 2020. A group of 130 staff and faculty called for a halt to the search for a new chief through a signed letter, instead asking for an examination of the policies and practices of the University Police Department.

“The larger context of law enforcement plays a significant role in how we both understand and experience public safety at Chico State,” the final report said.

In December 2020 the task force began the process of reviewing campus policing and making

POLICING » PAGE 5

BUTTE COUNTY

Young adult dies from COVID-19 complications

By **Will Denner**
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OROVILLE » Nearly two months had passed without COVID-19 claiming another life in Butte County, but on Monday, Butte County Public Health announced a county resident between 20 and 29 years old recently died due to complications from the virus.

The young adult resident is one of 187 people in Butte County to perish after contracting the virus, and the first since March 26, according to Butte County Public Health's COVID-19 dashboard. Butte County Public Health spokesperson Lisa Almaguer wrote in an email the county has “several more deaths under investigation right now.” The county health department reviews death certificates to confirm COVID-19 as the official cause of death. That process can take days, weeks or months, depending on the case.

In the earliest months of the pandemic, Butte County Public Health announced each individual COVID-19 death, but stopped during the summer months of 2020 as the virus began to spread at higher rates and deaths increased exponentially.

However, the county health department
COVID-19 » PAGE 8

HOPE IN SUPPORT

Torres Shelter clients share journeys after homelessness

By **Natalie Hanson**
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CHICO » Chico's only low barrier shelter is open again under certain COVID-19 restrictions, reporting a high level of need in the community for affordable housing and mental health concerns.

True North Housing Alliance and the Torres Shelter are often the first stop for people looking for aid while unsheltered. The shelter does not

require sobriety like the other main institution, the Jesus Center, does, and offers case managers with specialties for helping people access a variety of regional services.

Case Manager Brittney Norman said after five years at the shelter, she often sees people struggling with some form of mental health concern or substance abuse. Depending on the case, they might refer people who are recovering from addiction to the Salvation

Army or a sober living facility. However, many people do not have the resources to pay for the second option, she said — “Sober living is pretty expensive without MediCal.”

Norman said despite the restrictions placed on the shelter in the COVID-19 pandemic, most of her clients were understanding. Existing clients were kept inside the shelter 23 hours a day with only one hour allotted for errands, and new clients
SHELTER » PAGE 6



NATALIE HANSON — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

Deborah Fonseca talks Thursday about her experiences at the Torres Shelter with her dog in Chico.

DROUGHT

Fire season starts much drier than record 2020

Outlook for western U.S. fire season is grim because it's starting far drier than 2020's record-breaking year. **PAGE A2**



RHODE ISLAND

A little US city, battered by the virus, tells stories

The beleaguered people of Central Falls moved quickly through the high school gym's injection stations. **PAGE A3**

BUSINESS

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13,661.17.+190.18

NFL

Pros, cons of trading for Julio Jones

Jones said on national TV he's “out of there,” that his Atlanta Falcons tenure is coming to an end. **PAGE B1**

Fire

FROM PAGE 1

ior Analyst Jonathan Pangburn told this newspaper in September that homes are threatened by potential fires which spread faster and burn hotter, under the effects of climate change on drought levels and severely dry vegetation — parched after years of rising temperatures, decreasing precipitation and fire suppression.

But the onus to prevent fires as much as possible, and limit the potential for spark and spread, often falls squarely on property owners, Gaddie said. The key problem lies in how to enforce, where individual property rights are honored, but a community could be threatened, wherever a property goes unmaintained and fire risk increases. House to house spread, seen both Santa Rosa's 2017 Tubbs Fire and the Camp Fire, must be prevented.

"A homeowner may be doing their due diligence around their house, but a neighbor ... is not," Gaddie said. "That is one of the points the county is trying to work through. If their brush catches fire and throws embers onto my house, I have an issue."

Property maintenance — pulling and spraying weeds, blowing gutters, cleaning up the bottom half of trees and more — should be a year-round job, hopefully started in earnest in winter or when the grass is green, Gaddie said.

Homeowner John Ottoni showed off his home

just north of Chico, finished in June, but was advised he could be wasting his time spraying except for on star thistle weeds, which arrived early this year.

"I'm hitting it hard this week, I'll be getting my space done," Ottoni said. "I'll probably be looking at spraying, I've been weed whacking for months."

"Power equipment is dangerous for sparks," Gaddie said. "If you have to do it, use it very, very early. We're behind the time right now. The grass is dried and cured right now almost 100 percent."

Oroville could be more of a concern for firefighters than Chico, with more sprawl and rural homes in outlying areas with wildland urban interface.

Gaddie said it's frustrating from a fire prevention standpoint seeing unmaintained lots overgrow in areas like Thermalito, such as where a fire took place in June 2020 which took out two structures.

Seeing a lot overgrown this week, "I was like, are you kidding me right now?" Gaddie said. "We know what happened last year, and here's this lot again that hasn't been maintained in any capacity."

Homes set in Oroville's foothills on a slope need to be careful of where vegetation may be growing over into other people's property lines, he said. And in the Palermo and Wyandotte areas, it's concerning seeing other houses with lots of undergrowth around them in oak and grass topography.

But as far as what firefighters are most concerned

about, Cohasset and Forest Ranch are definitely high on the list — in part due to access and from not having thinned the way other foothill communities have. The last incidents approaching Cohasset were in 1999 and 1994 and vegetation has grown thick.

Gaddie pointed out homes north of Chico off Cohasset Road with varying degrees of mowing done, with concern for "ladder fuels," where branches or growth on a tree are low enough to carry flames from the ground and brush up the tree on many properties. He pointed out several newer homes built with more resistant materials like corrugated steel and aluminum siding.

Yet homes in Cohasset are more likely to be older construction with more wood and traditional materials. Roofs made of wood shingle referred to as "shake" are mind-blowing to see out there, Gaddie said — people have been warned how easily those roofs spark.

Cohasset also has limited access that gives Gaddie pause. Properties are located off Cohasset Road on multiple private roads, often dead ends, and there is no other artery to use for an evacuation if needed. Unlike Forest Ranch, which has several options for escape routes, even if they could be dangerous, Cohasset has one two-lane road up and down for firefighters to access homes — and for people to get out.

Gaddie grew frustrated seeing homes and trailers tucked into deep forest and thick overgrowth in Cohasset where some leave piles of

vegetation unchecked, roofs might be covered in pine needles and equipment is sometimes strewn near residences.

"Anything that's combustible next to your home poses a hazard for a wildfire," Gaddie said. "Too much potential for it to go bad."

But people tend to move to these areas for more privacy and a sense of living in nature, and they can be hard to convince to cut down trees and bushes.

"We're not asking you to cut down every tree within your property. We will come out there and advise you, too," he said.

Single entry homes with overgrown access routes are often too dangerous for fire companies to access, if they determine the home could be too risky to try to save.

"There's some homes we're not going to risk our lives to protect," he said. "Give us a chance to intervene and mitigate the fire."

While these overgrown private roads could be a project for grant work like that of the Butte County Fire Safe Council, Gaddie said it's a lot to ask private homeowners to get together and maintain it.

Within cities, property owners have updated requirements to comply with vegetation abatement. Chico staff updated the city ordinance requiring homeowners to handle weed abatement under Code Enforcement regulations. Code Enforcement staff is responsible for identifying vacant city properties containing weeds.

Driving back into the city surrounded by dry grass,



PHOTOS BY NATALIE HANSON — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

A horse is helping maintain vegetation Monday by eating from a pile at a residence north of Chico.



Cal Fire-Butte County Fire Captain John Gaddie talks about defensible space Monday in Cohasset.

Gaddie shook his head remembering recent days of high wind speeds, combined with historic drought levels. State data shows northern Sierra Nevada snowpack is down to 2% of average Monday, with 41 stations reporting the central Sierra Nevada is at 0% of average. It's likely no precipitation will be seen again until winter, he said.

It's why partnership of property owners with city and county resources is all-important to prevent disaster, he said.

"It's something that seems overwhelming, but I think with all parties involved ... I think we can make it," Gaddie said.

Contact reporter Natalie Hanson at 530-896-7763.

Shelter

FROM PAGE 1

ents had to be tested for COVID-19.

At one point during the winter months the shelter was closed to new entrants under the state's Purple Tier restrictions. Norman said people who have doctor's or other appointments experienced barriers due to needing to make telephone and virtual appointments.

"A lot of the individuals we see that are homeless right now, it's not all on them," Norman said. "People struggle with different things, we don't know their stories, and we don't know where they've been."

"It's hard to see them get judged," she said, adding every client needs a unique, personal approach.

Stories from inside

A wide variety of people have relied on the shelter for months or even years. While some are in the process of getting services or

new housing options, they could rely on Torres Shelter for some time.

Deborah Fonseca found herself in the shelter with her 25-year-old daughter and dog Peanut in September 2020, after she lived in Mexico and her mother passed away. She said they moved to a friend's home in Biggs but "it didn't work."

Once a hairdresser, Fonseca said Thursday the experience of suddenly becoming homeless was humbling.

"Sometimes it's difficult, but you just have to deal with it because you have to share your environment here with other people," she said. "You can't get angry with someone because they're different, you have to learn to control yourself."

"Without the help, I probably would have died," she said, due to not being able to handle living on the streets with her health issues. She said case managers have helped get applications in for housing she can afford, and vouched for her.

Fonseca said she loves Chico and hopes to stay, having lived in the city be-

fore. She will likely be living alone when she finds a place to live.

Raymond Pacheco said he's used the shelter on and off since age 17. He once transitioned with his wife into a permanent home and got back on his feet, but was in the shelter again with his dog. He is currently working on getting help with Butte County Behavioral Health and getting SSI benefits.

"They've always been very welcoming and helping me out to get on my feet and better myself," he said.

"It falls back on helping yourself to do better, and have staff who are willing to do the same thing."

Some are growing impatient to stop being in the shelter. Mark Beckering is a recovering alcoholic, sober for over two years — the same amount of time he has been at the Torres Shelter after 40 years living in Chico. He was also the first client in the shelter to get COVID-19, having had no symptoms.

"It's very difficult to get

into housing now," he said. He remembers spending three months on the streets and said he endured harassment from adolescents in Bidwell Park, and theft from other unhoused people.

"I never knew what it was to be homeless," he said. "Being here is very abnormal."

"This is not home to me. Everybody here wants to get out of here," he said. But he had praise for the case managers, who "try to help as best as they can."

Beckering has started to receive social security benefits and hopes to get on the list for affordable housing.

On the way out

Angela Keller had been at Torres Shelter a year when she said Thursday she has been unhoused for about six years as a parolee. She is about to leave to make a new home on her own with her partner.

After being incarcerated 23 times, she said Torres Shelter took her in when she began to experience seizures while staying at

the Jesus Center's Johnson House. She has also been in remission from cancer. Her family lives in Los Angeles and she is limited to travel because of the conditions of her parole.

Keller said she has been physically, mentally and sexually abused as a child and adult, and said she was in a physically abusive relationship for years before her time at the Torres Shelter. She subsequently relied heavily

on methamphetamine and heroin, and experienced critical medical issues which led to deciding to go to rehabilitation two years ago.

Keller has now been sober for over 20 months.

"Without them, I couldn't have gotten through it," she said of the shelter's staff. "When I wanted to give up and was sick I would be texting my advocate ... they were the shoulders to cry on."

She loves working in the shelter's kitchen, and said although seizures prevent it now, she will watch the

staff on duty in the dining hall.

"It will be hard when I pack my bags and get my own place. They encourage you, and they don't give up on you."

Sandra Phillips said she has been at the shelter for about two years, previously living in Butte and Glenn counties before becoming homeless four years ago.

"I was a shattered person when I got here," she said, adding she's on several lists for Section 8 housing.

"I could have had housing before, I just wasn't ready for it. It's been all up to me."

It was "sheer determination" that has gotten her through the last few years, Phillips said. She praised the case managers for their help moving her applications along more quickly.

She said she will soon have a place to live with her partner thanks to "a strong desire to be out of the shelter and live on my own. I wanted out, so I started working on it."

"If you're really serious about getting your feet back on the ground ... this is the place to do it."

Gene Cox has only been in the shelter since before Easter, having been in three hospitals for rehabilitation of a broken arm. She lived in Chico for over 20 years and her son's family and sister live nearby, but she relies on social security funds and Section 8 eligibility at this point.

She hopes to find a roommate and housing, but for now, she's reliant on the shelter — "My partner passed away, and I miss him terribly."

"But I'm independent, and life goes on."

Increasing needs
Executive Director Joy Amaro said Thursday the shelter is preparing to get plans to expand the facility's capacity approved.

Amaro said recently, the cases seen at the shelter by case managers often have "very severe" mental health concerns. Norman tends to be the case manager handling these clients.

Despite increasing needs and tight resources, "We just constantly adapt," Amaro said.

Contact reporter Natalie Hanson at 530-896-7763.

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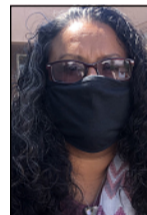
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