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Ideas for fire-safe developments are no secret; State commission laid some out in 2003, but is there the will to implement them?

Now that the Southern California fires of October are contained, after burning nearly 1,800 houses and 490,000 acres, Californians are continuing to assess some of the lessons learned.

Some of the lessons are holdovers from the 2003 fires, and they were laid out by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission.

The most significant fact is that people increasingly are moving into landscapes of chaparral where fire has long been part of the natural system.

In the past, these areas caught fire every decade. If people continue to build in what is called the "wildland/urban interface," the edges of naturally fire-prone forests and dry grasslands, they have to learn to live with the risk of fire. Protection from wildfire, as the commission noted in 2004, cannot simply rely on increased funding for equipment and firefighters.

The primary issue is how to act responsibly to create fire-safe communities. In this regard, two commission findings from 2004 stand out:

* "Currently, appropriate minimum building standards and fire safety requirements are neither mandated nor consistently enforced in all communities in High and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones."

* "Most structural losses occurred where homes had little or no vegetation clearance or were built using combustible building materials, and were thus vulnerable to wildfires."

Then as now, communities with strong building and brush clearance codes, backed by regular inspections, suffered the least losses. As the Washington Post story noted, "Houses that strictly adhered to fire-preventive building and landscaping rules survived the fires, while nearby structures that paid less attention to those

regulations went up in flames."

For example, in five newly built subdivisions in San Diego County where the Witch fire burned 197,990 acres, not one house burned. That area was subject to strict new building and landscaping codes and regular inspections. But in an older community a quarter-mile away, where residents did not adhere to fire department recommendations, the houses were destroyed.

The problem continues to be, as the commission noted in 2004, that recommendations concerning building code requirements and appropriate vegetation "have consistently been among the most difficult to implement."

That has to change.

People still are using combustible materials for building. Some communities have toughened building code standards -- such as banning wood shingle roofs and requiring fire retardant Class

A roofing, boxed eaves, fire sprinklers and spark arrestors on chimneys -- but others have not.

People also continue to keep inappropriate vegetation around their homes. Some communities have strengthened tree and brush management requirements -- such as requiring fire-resistant plants (including monkey flower and sage) and getting rid of combustible trees (including eucalyptus and palm trees) -- but others have not.

In the aftermath of the most recent fires, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants the commission to assess "next steps" in the state's fire preparation efforts. A top priority should be to pass strict code requirements -- and enforce them -- for post-fire rebuilding and retrofitting of existing homes.