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A planning research project provided by the Oregon Chapter of the American Planning Association, Community Planning Assistance Program, in service to Marion County, the Mid-Willamette Valley Council of Governments, and the Santiam Canyon community

Background and Purpose

“In 2020, wildfires in Oregon burned more than 1.2 million acres statewide, with some of the largest and most devastating fires worsened by a severe windstorm on Labor Day that spanned eight counties (Clackamas, Douglas, Jackson, Klamath, Lane, Lincoln, Linn, and Marion). In the aggregate, these fires destroyed more than 5,000 homes and commercial structures. The impact to communities across the state was devastating.”

- *Recovering and Rebuilding from Oregon's 2020 Wildfires*, State of Oregon report presented by the Governor's Wildfire Recovery Council, Jan. 4, 2021

The 2020 wildfires in Oregon overwhelmed many Santiam Canyon communities, destroying homes, businesses, community facilities (such as churches, fire stations, and civic buildings), historic features, and the infrastructure that supports them. The cities of Detroit and Gates, and many rural residences in between, experienced the most significant and devastating impacts to properties. Idanha, Mill City, Lyons, and surrounding areas of the Santiam Canyon suffered moderate to extensive damage with fewer structures impacted. The area's forests, natural

areas, county and state parks, and other recreational attractions, along with Santiam Canyon's tourist economy, have been severely impacted by the fires. As disasters become more common in Oregon, communities and planners have increasingly found themselves needing to address both disaster recovery and resiliency.

Following the wildfires, the Oregon Chapter of the American Planning Association (OAPA) reached out to the Mid-Willamette Valley Council of Governments (MWVCOG) and Marion County with an offer to support recovery and rebuilding through OAPA's Community Assistance Planning Program (CAPP). CAPP organizes experienced professionals willing to volunteer free planning assistance to local governments and community-based organizations in under-resourced communities. In partnership with the MWVCOG and FEMA, the OAPA CAPP team for the Santiam Canyon has undertaken some of the research groundwork needed to assist longer-term community decisions, project identification, and a resilient recovery.

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Residents, businesses, and local governments of the canyon are still addressing immediate needs and each community impacted will have their own schedule and interests to be addressed. The OAPA CAPP project is intended to offer the MWVCOG and Santiam Canyon communities a resource that sets the stage for, catalyzes, and informs the anticipated community-based planning processes. While the scope of this work did not include community engagement, the information developed by the CAPP team should help to strategically position the Santiam Canyon communities, the MWVCOG, Marion County, Linn County, and other area partners to hit the ground running on grant and funding applications; economic analysis and studies to support rebuilding; and to engage in community-based planning and visioning efforts when communities are ready to proceed with those steps.

Methodology

Recovery planning helps communities determine how to rebuild after a disaster. The output is often very focused on projects and implementation. Resiliency planning looks ahead to what events and circumstances might impact a community in the future and contemplates how best to prepare for those circumstances. In other words, it helps prepare a community to adapt and recover quickly from disruptions, like a wildfire, or pandemic, earthquakes, etc., and helps to make that community more self-sufficient in the process.

Volunteer planning professionals from across Oregon, serving as the Santiam Canyon CAPP team, set out to research and document critical information for planning Santiam Canyon's recovery. With assistance from the MWVCOG,

Marion County, Oregon Regional Solutions Team and other state agencies, and planners with FEMA Community Planning and Capacity Building, the CAPP team collected and reviewed existing and available relevant information (plans, studies, policies, etc.), identified additional needed information, and then produced summary reports that highlight strategic opportunities and guidance on key topics of interest for the planning work ahead.



The accompanying elements of the CAPP team's research include a summary of existing plans, policies, and relevant studies, an assessment of how the wildfires have impacted those plans, and initial ideas for improvements or next steps. The CAPP team has also developed a compendium of best planning practices identified by disaster response experts across the country and lessons learned from the experiences of other communities recovering from wildfires. Finally, the team compiled a directory of individuals and organizations charting recovery projects and plans for Santiam Canyon recovery.

All of the CAPP work has been designed as a "living document" that can be made available for use by project managers and grant writers, readily updated by the MWVCOG and its partners, and shared with community stakeholders, partner organization, and users. MWVCOG plans to have all reports and resources available via an online format to ensure ongoing access to documentation and resources.

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Opportunities for Recovery

While many of the systems and unique places of Santiam Canyon have been damaged by the wildfires, the strength of the people, community connections, and foundational plans remain intact. Generally, the CAPP research has found the community and economic development goals created over many years before the wildfires are still relevant and serve as a strong underpinning for rebuilding. At the same time, the disaster has exposed plans and policies that could be improved to ensure greater resilience of systems and, ultimately, to strengthen the community's

ability to respond and rapidly recover from any future disaster or emergency. The "planning context" summaries provided by the CAPP team highlight areas where plans and policies need to be updated to reflect current conditions or strengthen resilience. A common theme noted by the researchers is the need for continued collaboration and community-driven decisions, which includes a need for increased staffing and capacity building in the Santiam Canyon to ensure a community-supported recovery and a resilient Santiam Canyon.