

Legislative Testimony

From: V. Michelle Warden

To: HWREC Exhibits

Subject: Wildfire Recovery – Detroit, Oregon

Date: 2/22/2021

Thank you for this opportunity to share my experience as a survivor of the Lionshead fire which caused catastrophic damage to my beloved town of Detroit, Oregon. My family moved to Detroit when I was five years old. It has been my home for 50 years with the exception of a couple of years when I was away at college. I graduated from school in Detroit, married my high school sweetheart, raised two amazing children and welcomed two beautiful grandchildren. Although I grew up in Detroit, we struggled with housing stability. My husband came to Detroit when he was in middle school and was abandoned by his family at the age of 12. He spent much of his life without a home. At the age of 24 when he was working at the sawmill he saw an opportunity to buy us a home for the same cost of rent. This was a dream for both of us; an opportunity to change the cycle of poverty and dysfunction in our lives. We often opened our home informally and formally to children and families in need in our community. Our home was our place of refuge and a place of refuge for others. Our family loved the Detroit community so much that I chose to make the drive to Salem for college and work for the past 30 years.

We had been watching the smoke from the Lions Head fire for almost two weeks. Labor day weekend, half of Detroit lake was closed to boaters and swimmers. We were told helicopters were going to be dipping buckets of water on the fire. This never happened. On Monday afternoon our power went out. Things were smoky, but we had no idea what was to come. With no electricity we went to bed a little earlier than usual. Our son, a timber cruiser for the Forest Service was staying with us at the time. He woke us up to say people were posting on Facebook that the fire was close to us. Within a few hours, we had police officers driving through town telling us to evacuate. We got out with the clothes on our backs and nothing more. We learned two days later that our home was gone. Now what!! What do you do when you have literally lost everything you have worked for all your life? We are still trying to figure it out.

What we personally need right now:

- Advocacy with the federal government – we applied for FEMA – Due to our income we are not eligible for FEMA, but we were referred to the SBA to apply for a disaster loan. We were approved for a \$217,000 loan to help with debris removal, structural rebuild, landscaping and contents. We provided full disclosure of our insurance policy on our loan paperwork. Once we received money from our insurance company, (half of which was used to pay off our mortgage), we received a notice from the SBA that our loan was recalculated and we would only get \$6,000.00 – After having a meltdown on the phone, I got a call back and was told they could loan us up to \$19,000.00
- Extension from the insurance company on securing stable housing. We are working on this, but hit a road block with the updated information from SBA – this has caused us to lose time figuring out what to do.

Local access to a pump station for an RV so we can stay in our community at least part time to begin the process of rebuilding

Local access to gas and propane

What our community needs:

- Assurance that the infrastructure is in place for new homes being built (water, septic or sewer)
- Leniency with building permits
- Needs assessment
- Clear vision
- Master work plan
- Communication that reaches all citizens
- Local access to a pump station for RVs -ASAP
- Access to gas and propane – ASAP
- Continued access to water
- Temporary housing for construction workers
- A safe place for construction supplies and an organized way to transport materials to help save costs
- City streets closed off to non-local traffic during construction process or at designated times
- Transparency around where all the money that has been donated is going and how to access funds
- A point of contact for Detroit specifically to organize donations and volunteer labor
- Tracking of funds/donations to ensure they are being given to citizens of Detroit – I suspect many of the early donations were given to people who were not impacted by the fires –

How do working class people rebuild in this market? We will no doubt have more people living off the grid out of necessity. This does not help the tax base. – We still don't have a clear way forward.

Thank you so much for taking the time to ask for feedback and to listen.

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