



Protecting Cities In Fire Prone Regions

Randal O'Toole

October 25, 2017

If you live in a fire-prone area, which includes most of California, it is not a good idea to allow ivy and other plants to cover the sides of your building, as this [winery](#) and this [church](#) did near Santa Rosa. Both were lost to last week's wildfires.

Similarly, if you are a legislator in a fire-prone state, it is not a good idea to outlaw fire-resistant developments. As now-retired Forest Service researcher [Jack Cohen](#) relates in the above video, one requirement for making your home fire-safe is to have no large flammable structures within 100 feet of the home. That pretty much means people should build on one-acre or larger lots. But in California, the nation's most fire-prone state, urban planners' mania for density has led the legislature to effectively outlaw such low-density development. Santa Rosa's [Coffey Park neighborhood](#) consisted of conventionally sized suburban homes on 50-by-100-foot lots—small for a modern suburb—resulting in many houses being only a few feet apart from one another. If one house caught fire during a dry spell, the intense radiant heat would be sure to set off the next home. As a result, the neighborhood is now a [smoking ruin](#).

As the Antiplanner noted a decade ago, California developers have built [shelter-in-place neighborhoods](#) that are so fire-resistant that it is safer for residents to stay in their homes than to evacuate. Wildfires have swept by these neighborhoods and not harmed a single home. Sadly, this technique has been [criticized](#) by even the California Department of Forestry, which argues that making homes fire-safe will just encourage people to live in fire-prone areas (meaning almost all of California). They suggested that people build their homes closer together to make them “easier to protect.” That didn't work very well in Santa Rosa.

If California had allowed urban areas to grow in the modern way, with density at the center and increasingly low densities at the edges, then a ring of low-density, shelter-in-place neighborhoods around Santa Rosa and other cities could have provided a fire break protecting the denser developments. But this is practically forbidden in California. So, we will get more disasters like the one in Santa Rosa and the 1991 [Oakland Hills firestorm](#).

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute specializing in land use and transportation policy. He has written several books demonstrating the futility of government planning. Prior to working for Cato, he taught environmental economics at Yale, UC Berkeley, and Utah State University.