

NEWS • News

SUBSCRIBER ONLY

Local Habitat for Humanity doing 'heavy lift' to help Altadena fire victims rebuild

The group hopes to build 30 houses in the Eaton fire area of Altadena and Pasadena in the next few months.



A rendering of one of the styles of houses homeowners can choose from in rebuilding in the Eaton fire areas. San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity received the first approved permit for a rebuild on Olive Avenue in Altadena on Wednesday, April 9, 2025. The group is moving ahead, hoping to complete 200 house rebuilds or repairs in the fire zone. (image from The Foothill Catalog Foundation and the SGV Habitat For Humanity.)



By **STEVE SCAUZILLO** | sscauzillo@scng.com | Daily News

UPDATED: April 14, 2025 at 6:55 AM PDT

With the first rebuild permit for the entire [Eaton fire](#) area under its belt, the San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity says “the doors are open” to another 200 low-income households whose homes were destroyed or damaged in the fire.

The [issuance of the first permit on April 9](#) by Los Angeles County out of nearly 7,000 potential properties has boosted the nonprofit’s confidence and set the stage for action.

“Having the first permit in Altadena is a huge moment. It is truly a beacon of hope for everyone in that area,” said Bryan Wong, chief executive officer of SGV Habitat.

“These are super exciting days for us,” Wong continued in an interview on Thursday, April 10. “We are gearing up. We’re past the talking phase and into the doing phase.”

About 200 signed up with the nonprofit by going to its website at sgvhabitat.org/rebuild-la and filling out an intake form labeled “construction needs assessment form.”

Though the first group is filled, anyone wanting to get in line for future consultations can fill out the intake form, said Habitat for Humanity officials.



The nonprofit will host the first 50 respondents on the list this weekend, with more sessions to follow in the coming weeks. Each property owner will be personally screened by Habitat staff, Wong explained.

The potential participants were from low-income households and had either no insurance or were under-insured and therefore, could not afford to rebuild without assistance. All wrote they want to build back into the Altadena or Pasadena community, he explained.

“Our hope is that in the first year we will build 30 homes,” Wong said, adding that construction on certain properties would begin in “months, if not weeks,” he added.

Normally, Habitat builds about 60 to 70 homes a year. They are working on building homes in El Sereno, on lots purchased by Caltrans decades ago for the extension of the 710 Freeway that was killed.

The group, made famous by the volunteer efforts of the late President Jimmy Carter, uses a combination of skilled labor, dedicated contractors and volunteers to build homes at lower than market cost. The volunteers, who can sign up on their website at www.sgvhabitat.org/eatonfirerelief, pound nails and do other work in what amounts to the old-fashioned “barn raising” method.

The nonprofit has a list of contractors who are dedicated to their cause — building homes for those who normally cannot afford them, especially in the LA County market where the average home value is \$898,298, according to Zillow.

“I am often able to get preferential financing for the homeowners,” Wong said. “For every aspect of this process, we do it faster and cheaper.”

The group is a single point of entry, making architects, engineers, contractors and financing firms that they’ve worked with for decades available in one step, he said. They can also get breaks on material and labor costs; also, immigration concerns are not an issue, he added.

“We raise money for gap financing for people who are under-insured,” Wong said. Plus there are the volunteers willing to help with construction, cutting down on costs.

House designs are offered in three styles: Craftsman, Spanish and ranch. But floor plans are standardized. This makes construction uniform, so crews can go from one project to the next more easily. “We are not custom home builders,” he said.

This is the first time Habitat for Humanity in the SGV is working in a fire zone. That can add numerous variables and make the process more complex, Wong said.

Just finding and talking to the homeowners is difficult, because they’re living throughout the region or out of state, he said. The [Eaton fire](#) destroyed 9,414 structures, damaged 1,074 and took the lives of 18 people.

The emotional reactions vary, causing the nonprofit to delay some projects because many have not decided if they want to rebuild or sell the property and relocate. Some are still grieving the loss of a generational home and most of the landmarks in their community.

“They are wondering: ‘Should I come back to a city that doesn’t have any businesses? If the people don’t come back, will the businesses come back,’ ” Wong said.



A 4,058-square-foot lot in Altadena, seen on Wednesday, April 9, 2025, is the first property in the Eaton fire area to have building permits approved. Records show the owners purchased the home from Habitat for Humanity in Nov. 2023 after the nonprofit built the home. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

The first permit obtained by the nonprofit in less than 60 days was for a house on North Olive Avenue that SGV Habitat built and sold to a family in November 2023. The West Altadena house burned to the ground in the Jan. 7-Jan. 8 Eaton fire but has been cleared of all debris.

“We have not decided what we are doing to move forward,” said Brenda Valentin, listed as an owner on the property deed and reached by phone. She declined to elaborate further.

Weeks after the fire, SGV Habitat started approaching people at shelters, at churches and other community organizations. “Once they realized we did get a permit (for the Olive Avenue property), then people were interested,” Wong said.

A huge difference from previous home-building successes is that these properties are already owned by someone and often, the owners still have mortgages.

“We don’t own any of the land. We have to work with each individual homeowner on their particular plan. Also, they have mortgages or no mortgages and it matters if they have insurance. The process is much more time-consuming,” he explained.

Just building a house is no longer the first task. Habitat officials must see what the owners want — they can pick a design. Also, they end up talking to insurance companies and banks to see what they’ll offer.

“I’ve never had to deal with a disaster like this,” Wong said. “It is a heavy lift.”