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Another fire in a new world

By **TONY PAUKER AND MARY LYDON**

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Last week, the Urban Land Institute was gathering for its Fall Conference in Las Vegas. I had my bags packed and ticket in hand, but was torn between heading off to one of the most prestigious real estate conferences in the country or staying behind and being with my fellow San Diegans during a "family" crisis. Realistically, there was nothing for me to do in San Diego, but I felt pulled to stay. When friends who needed to evacuate called looking for shelter, I knew what I could do to play my role. So I turned over my house as my contribution and headed off to visit with 7500 of my closest ULI associates.

The conference was fabulous. Kofi Annan, the former United Nations secretary-general and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, delivered the keynote address. Other speakers included economist Michael Boskin; former Medtronic CEO Bill George, now a professor of management practice at the Harvard Business School; and Queen Noor of Jordan.

But when I was back in my hotel room I turned on CNN to watch in horror, the city I love and that sometimes drives me crazy with its small-town mentality, engulfed at the edges in flames.

Interestingly enough, when I arrived back home Friday, I watched the news that portrayed a San Diego that took my breath away. What I saw was government, fire fighters and citizens operating in unity. Our government officials, local newscasters and fire chiefs were doing an outstanding job of effectively and accurately communicating the plan and the progress. The citizens evacuated peacefully and willingly amidst fear and the unknown. Support flowed in from businesses, nonprofit organizations and San Diegans in general. But on Saturday as I was cleaning up after my guests departed I burst into deep sobs feeling the grief of what was lost. I thought how could I experience elation and grief simultaneously and it reminded me that life is like that.

The crisis has spawned all kinds of discussion about how to better plan our communities at the edge: wild land-urban interface zones, shelter in place and better science-based evidence to understand why houses ignite and burn down. ULI plans to be a part of our regional discussion as we move forward in a thoughtful way of implementing a strategy for developing and rebuilding at the edges.

Since the 2003 Cedar Fire, we are seeing better local cooperation, unanimity and coordination which are a great start to a more holistic consensus on land use and infrastructure issues, and the beginning of more regional solutions. The world is also in a very different place since then. Today, the reality of climate change has tipped over into every aspect of our thinking, planning and living. This alone requires that our leadership stay ahead of the learning curve so they are in a position to make decisions in our best interest.

Last year, the ULI San Diego/Tijuana Real Estate Trends conference focused on the great infrastructure deficit facing not only San Diego, but also the entire country. A few months later, a national dialog ensued spurred after the bridge collapse in Minneapolis this past summer. This year, our Trends program will focus on sustainability where leaders can learn what is emerging in this new world we find ourselves in. The day will include a special keynote address by Hunter Lovins, founder of Natural Capitalism Solutions named a Hero for the Planet by *Time* magazine. Lovins works with corporations and governments worldwide to develop and implement sustainable energy and resource systems. Panels include sustainability trends for all product types and how climate change will impact CEQA. Each attendee will receive a copy of Emerging Trends in Real Estate (a trends and forecast publication with a 29-year history, and is the most highly regarded and widely read forecast report in the real estate industry. Emerging Trends in Real Estate (2008, undertaken jointly by ULI and PricewaterhouseCoopers, provides an outlook on U.S. investment and development trends, real estate finance and capital markets, property sectors, metropolitan areas and other real estate issues.

If you are a leader, you will put yourself at the forefront of thinking and implementation of best practices by attending the ULI San Diego/Tijuana Real Estate Trends Conference being held 7:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Nov. 13 at the Hilton Torrey Pines. Register at ulisd.org.

Pauker is chair and Lydon is executive director of Urban Land Institute of San Diego/Tijuana.