Tona Petersen, who was displaced from Paradise due to the Camp Fire, poses for a portrait at the Comanche Creek Greenway on May 4, 2021, in Chico, Calif. The Comanche Creek Greenway is the site of an unhoused community where Chico residents are currently safe from sweeps by local police. *Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept*

A Climate Dystopia in Northern California

California's divided and fire-scarred cities, reeling from climate disasters, need a Green New Deal.

The Intercept, by Naomi Klein, May 7 2021, 4:00 a.m.

It's a ritual that has been repeated many times over the coldest months of Northern California's winter. The Chico police arrive between 9 a.m. and noon on a Thursday, perhaps in the hopes of catching people when they are home. Home, in this case, being flimsy tents, draped in tarps, many of them strung up between pine trees, secured to fences, or hidden beneath highway overpasses. The cops read out orders and sometimes hand out flyers: You have 72 hours to clear all of your belongings or they will be destroyed.

Before the deadline, volunteers usually show up with trailers and pickup trucks to help with the move. They load up bicycles, coolers, and cats, as well as clothing stuffed in suitcases, plastic laundry baskets, and garbage bags. Then they drive around this scrappy city in the Sacramento Valley looking for a new place to set up camp — only to have police show up a few days or weeks later and repeat the whole wrenching eviction again.

In April, Chico's anti-homelessness sweeps drew a harsh rebuke from a federal judge, who accused the city of willfully violating the law by flouting its legal obligation to provide viable shelter alternatives to its unhoused residents. Even in California, where the lack of affordable

housing has reached epidemic levels in Los Angeles and San Francisco, Chico — an outdoorsy college town — stands out for the ruthlessness with which its city government and police have turned on unhoused residents. The American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California recently condemned the city for failing "to address the needs of its unhoused population while simultaneously passing ordinances that criminalize everyday behavior unhoused people undertake to survive."

Adding a dystopian layer to this story: According to a survey by the Butte Countywide Homeless Continuum of Care, about a quarter of Chico's unsheltered residents lost their homes in the 2018 Camp Fire which burned the neighboring town of Paradise to the ground, taking the lives of 85 people. For this reason, Chico's war on the unhoused may be providing a grim glimpse into an eco-authoritarian future, in which the poor victims of climate change-fueled disasters are treated like human refuse by those whose wealth has protected them, at least in the short term, from the worst impacts of planetary warming.

A view of the ridge above Butte Creek Canyon, which burned in the Camp Fire, outside Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021. *Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept*

A Brutal Crackdown

Two and half years ago, when this region was hit by the deadliest wildfire in California's history, few would have predicted that Chico would be the scene of this kind of repression. The city, in fact, made national headlines for the warm welcome it offered to the thousands of evacuees who fled the ferocious firestorm that had engulfed the town of Paradise. Multiple shelters were set up, and the parking lot of the Chico Walmart was transformed into a sprawling campground and soup kitchen, with residents donating tents and sleeping bags, volunteers serving hot food, and

Chico State students organizing team sports and other activities for the Paradise kids. Many opened their homes and spare bedrooms to strangers. The outpouring of neighborly love and mutual aid was such a bright spot amid the fire's destruction that it made the New York Times. Mark Stemen, a professor of geography at California State University in Chico, memorably put it to me like this: "A tsunami of fire and terror rolled down the hill from Paradise. But that tsunami was buffeted by a blanket of love and comfort" when evacuees arrived, by the thousands, in his home city.

When I first wrote about Chico for The Intercept, it was on the occasion of introducing a Chico Green New Deal, a landmark plan championed by the city's then vice mayor, Alex Brown, developed in consultation with Cal State climate experts, and supported by the local chapter of the Sunrise Movement. Like its national inspiration, Chico's framework married rapid decarbonization targets with plans for more affordable housing; a safe and sustainable food system; investments in "clean, 21st century" public transit; and green job creation, including projects earmarked for the poorest residents.

The experiment was urgent. Chico had just seen its population increase by around 20,000 immediately after the fire — in a city of roughly 100,000. Its city manager, Mark Orme, described the impact of the fire as "15-20 years of population growth overnight." Adding further complexity was the fact that Chico had long failed to provide anything like adequate affordable housing for its residents, pushing many into the city's parks and streets. Which is part of the reason why Butte County, home to both Chico and Paradise, had declared a housing "state of emergency" one month before the Camp Fire happened, a disaster that displaced an additional 50,000 people at its peak.

An evacuee encampment at a Walmart parking lot in Chico, Calif., on Nov. 19, 2018.
Photo: Josh Edelson/The Washington Post via Getty Images

If affordable housing and transit solutions weren't rolled out quickly, it was already clear that Chico would have trouble sustaining that initial wave of post-fire solidarity. In an interview at the time, Brown noted that a major lesson from the Camp Fire was that, in our era of climate

disruption, “one of the things we can expect is displacement”: people being forced to move from one community to another. Which is why investing in affordable housing was included in Chico’s climate plan. For Brown, the Camp Fire’s impact on both Paradise and Chico showed the pressing need to build “communities that are more resilient to these shifts. … We can demonstrate what a Green New Deal looks like at the local level.”

That was November 2019. Today, Chico, with its brutal crackdown on unhoused people in the grips of a deadly pandemic and in the midst of serial wildfire disasters, does not demonstrate community “resilience.” It demonstrates something else entirely: what it looks like when the climate crisis slams headlong into a high-end real estate bubble and social infrastructure starved by decades of austerity. It also shows what happens when locally developed climate justice plans are denied the federal and state financing that they need to rapidly turn into a lived reality — precisely the gap that a new package of Green New Deal legislation introduced to the House and Senate is seeking to fill.

Chico demonstrates what it looks like when the climate crisis slams headlong into a high-end real estate bubble and social infrastructure starved by decades of austerity.

The combination of factors that has created this crisis in Chico is far from unique to Northern California. After decades of defunding social programs, coupled with wild overfunding of police, a great many communities across the country find themselves stretched too thin to absorb a major shock, particularly when it comes to housing and mental health supports. And without these other tools, every challenge quickly turns into a matter of “public safety.”

Since I reported from Chico a year and a half ago, this story has taken a series of grim turns. The city council, then dominated by cautious Democrats, was slow to act on Brown’s Green New Deal plans (“the political will was a little bit on the lackluster side” are her diplomatic words). Meanwhile, with Donald Trump still in the White House and Republicans blocking climate spending in the Senate, there was no way to get federal green financing quickly, particularly for affordable housing.

The Comanche Creek Greenway seen on May 4, 2021, in Chico, Calif.
Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

Then the coronavirus pandemic hit, throwing many more people in Butte County (as elsewhere) into various states of economic and social distress. Stemen told me local activists were all geared up to hold a big rally calling for a “Green New Decade.” He said, “We had banners and

signs and sunflowers and were ready to rock." Then lockdown happened, and the signs just sat in his yard, for months. Brown recalled that once the pandemic was declared, "there wasn't much room for a conversation about planning for the future, when we were dealing with these immediate crises." In late August and early September 2020, another wildfire struck the region, incinerating two towns and displacing yet more people in the county. The city opened up some hotel rooms to older people who were particularly vulnerable to Covid-19, but there were not nearly enough rooms for everyone who needed shelter.

Throughout this two-and-a-half-year period of shock after shock, housing costs in Chico have continued to soar. First it was in response to the uptick in demand from Paradise evacuees and people working on post-disaster reconstruction, which saw a spike in rents and made Chico among the hottest housing markets in the country. Today the boom continues, but now it is in response to a pandemic-fueled influx of Bay Area professionals and retirees looking to telecommute or chill out in a more affordable, low-key community. According to the California Association of Realtors, the price of a single-family house in Butte County increased by a staggering 16.1 percent last year, with Chico at the center of the frenzy. A headline at a local ABC affiliate summed up the market's current trajectory: "Up, up, up."

In a part of the state steeped in gold rush lore (Paradise crowns a "Miss Gold Nugget" as part of its annual Gold Nugget Days), local property developers and construction companies are welcoming high-end real estate as their modern-day bonanza. "They're coming with cash, and they're ready to go," Katy Thoma, president of the Chico Chamber of Commerce, said of the big city migrants. Existing houses are flipping, and new ones are going up — but according to Brown, the city is "prioritizing luxury condos and five-bedroom, single family homes, with the Bay Area transplants in mind."

A sign advertises a new suburban development of single-family homes on the outskirts of Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021.
Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

This is not only a problem for Chico's low- and middle-income residents who are getting priced out of their community. It's a climate problem as well: Many of those Bay Area transplants will become part of the state's growing fleet of "supercommuters" who drive hours to get to

meetings at their company headquarters, adding to California's transportation-related emissions, which in 2019 made up 40 percent of its total. And those emissions were rising.

Chico's failure to provide homes that its residents can afford well predates the Camp Fire. According to a report commissioned by the city, between 2014 and 2019, Chico added 2,724 housing units geared for those with "above moderate income" — almost double its planned allocation. Meanwhile, it added just 15 units of housing for very low-income earners in that same period, just 1.5 percent of its planned allocation. In large part, this is because of zoning rules that favor single-family homes over apartment buildings. And it's also because huge profit margins just aren't there in affordable multi-unit housing. For instance, a plan to build six stories of affordable housing was recently approved in Chico — only to have the land put up for sale for $5 million. "There's a lot of factors pushing up the cost of housing," local housing rights advocates wrote. "One we can see here is the exaggerated claims of speculative landowners."

After the Paradise fire, there was a profound sense of solidarity among the 27,000 people who lived in that wooded town. According to the public narrative, the community had suffered together and would rebuild together. Jessie Mercer, a local artist, put form to that hope when she collected 18,000 keys from homes, churches, businesses, and cars that had burned in Paradise and welded them into a giant phoenix that she unveiled on the fire's one-year anniversary, an image that went around the world. That would be Paradise, many believed: a triumphant phoenix rising from the ashes.

But it hasn't worked out that way. On the contrary, the fates of fire survivors have bifurcated sharply. Paradise's middle-class fire victims have, for the most part, been able to move out of emergency mode and rebuild their lives. Despite warnings about ongoing wildfire vulnerability, hundreds of families have returned to Paradise — many to freshly built homes more spacious than the ones taken by fire, thanks to insurance payouts. Others have sold their land to eager developers and settled in less fire-prone areas nearby, including in Chico.

But Paradise previously had a large population of low-income residents as well, who lived for the most part in rented apartments and mobile home parks, overwhelmingly without home insurance. After being evicted from the Walmart parking lot to make way for Thanksgiving shoppers, many never did find stable homes. Instead, they moved through Chico's shelters, and eventually its parks and waterways, their lives intermingling with those of Chico's other unhoused individuals and families, all of them shut out of the city's booming real estate market.

When Covid-19 hit, the city council instructed police to leave those urban campers alone, because moving risked increasing the virus's spread. But the city failed to provide many camps with basic sanitation facilities, let alone create a sanctioned camping area, as many other cities have done. In the midst of this, a needle exchange program was introduced to help address high rates of hepatitis C. At the same time, local housing rights activists report that the police, prevented from evicting urban campers and many ideologically opposed to harm-reduction strategies for drug users, seemed to be on strike, refusing to enforce basic laws like keeping dogs on leashes.

Left: A new suburban development of single-family homes is seen on the outskirts of Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021. Right: Luxury apartments for California State University, Chico, students are seen in Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021.

This led to a head-on collision with many of Chico's middle-class residents, for whom a walk, run, or a bike ride in the park provided the only sanctioned forms of recreation during long stretches of the pandemic. As frustrations over pets, garbage, and needles mixed with more generalized lockdown rage, the mood in Chico's parks rapidly deteriorated.

It was in this context, ahead of the 2020 elections, that a local deep-pocketed political action committee called Citizens for a Safe Chico declared war on the encampments, painting the entire unhoused population of Chico as violent, drug-addled "vagrants" and "transients" (despite evidence that the overwhelming majority had been living in the county for years). With a budget of a quarter of a million dollars, Citizens for a Safe Chico spent the pandemic churning out sensational videos interviewing irate business owners and purporting to show the city going to hell. Some attracted tens of thousands of views. According to filings obtained by The Intercept, most of the PAC's top individual and business donors have ties to the real estate, construction, or development industries.

The campaign was an unqualified success. On the same day that the country voted to unseat Trump, Chico's city council, previously dominated by Democrats, flipped Trumpian right, with only two progressives left. Brown kept her seat but lost her job as vice mayor. The position is now held by Kasey Reynolds, owner of Shubert's, a local ice cream and candy shop, who handed out samples during her campaign calling for a "Sweet & Safe Chico." Her three-pronged "recipe" was: balance the budget, "support the police department," and "suppress criminal vagrancy," a plan that earned her the nickname "ice cream fascist." (She strongly objects to the label.) In January 2021, the new council's first act was to order local police to sweep the parks of campers. And then to do it again. And again.

Residents enjoy the outdoors at a park in Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021.
Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

Hardening Buildings and Hearts

The majority of those being evicted from their camps are not wildfire victims; most are survivors of more private, slower-moving disasters, including medical debt, domestic violence, and serious mental illness. Some, who lost housing to Chico's post-disaster rent hikes, have been impacted by the wildfire indirectly. Others, however, have followed a far more direct line from the flames to the streets. A survey conducted on the eve of the pandemic lockdown found that 23 percent of unsheltered people in Butte County had become homeless in the Camp Fire, which is hardly surprising given that it incinerated 18,000 structures.

These are people like Jamie Jamison, whose home was destroyed in that fire, and who had been camping by a creek in Chico during the sweeps. "Everybody is struggling and we just try to grab our end of the rope and keep pulling you know," Jamison told a local reporter. "We need food, we need medicine. … Financial aid or assistance from the government because this is a catastrophe." Twenty-three-year-old Alexzander Hall, another Camp Fire survivor, was also uprooted in the sweeps. "We're homeless. We're not a disease," Hall said. "You can't just get rid of us and then expect us to be gone. That's not the way it works. We're people. We're trying to survive. We're like anybody else. Everybody is one paycheck away." River Lebert, who has been living in Butte County for 25 years, longs to go back home to Paradise but told the Chico Enterprise-Record he never got a case worker to help and "I slipped through the cracks. … I'm still recovering from it."

Many of these Paradise survivors received donated clothing, tents, and sleeping bags from Chico residents after the Camp Fire — only to have the Chico police threaten to throw those very items into dumpsters after the initial wave of empathy faded away. It's a situation that raises troubling questions. Fire prevention specialists speak about the need to "harden" buildings against flames, everything from removing vegetation too close to external walls to replacing wooden roofs with clay or tile. But in Chico, it seems that some hearts are hardening too, an ominous sign for future disasters.

Left: Community organizer Addison Winslow poses for a portrait at the Comanche Creek Greenway on May 4, 2021, in Chico, Calif. Right: Tona Petersen, who was displaced from Paradise after the Camp Fire, poses for a portrait at the Comanche Creek Greenway on May 4, 2021, in Chico, Calif. Photos: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

Tona Petersen's tent is seen at the Comanche Creek Greenway on May 4, 2021, in Chico, Calif.
Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

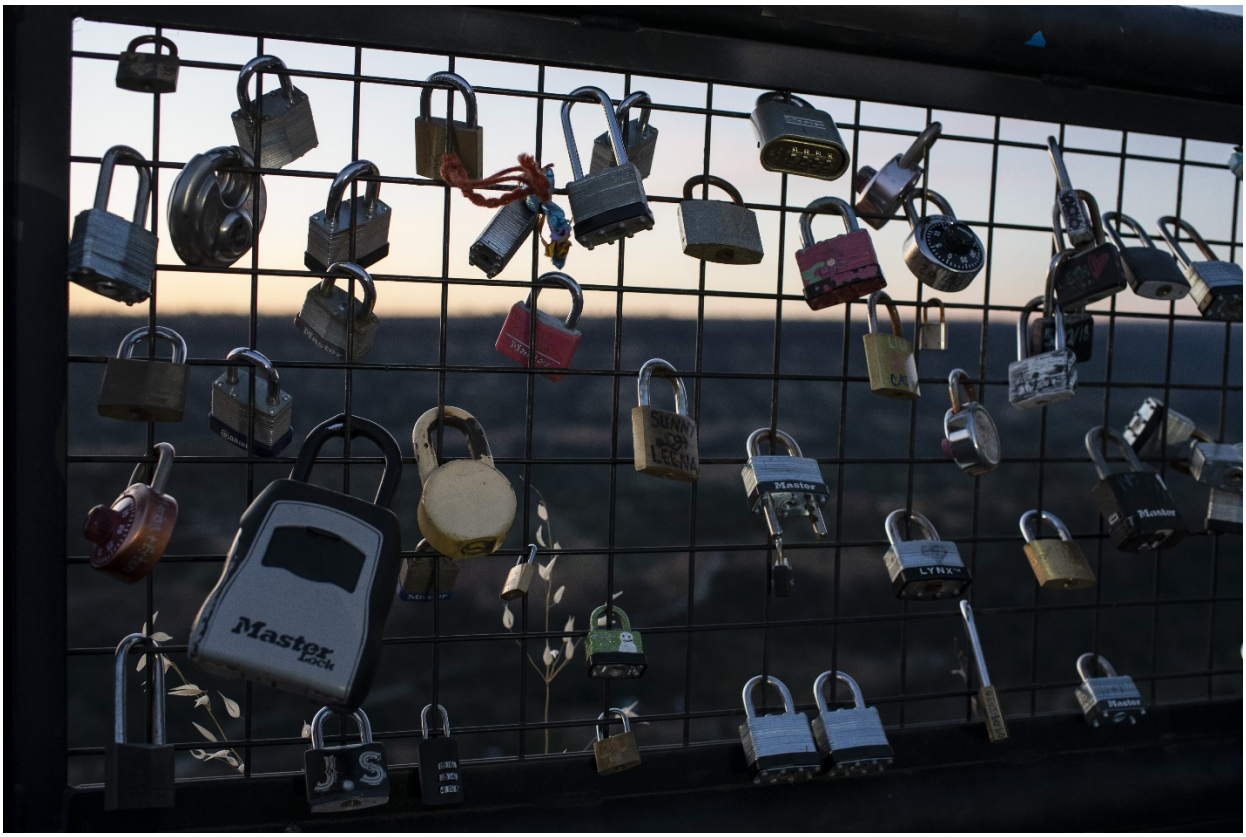
When I asked local housing rights activist Addison Winslow how the community's attitudes toward the unhoused could shift so quickly, he told me that one of Safe Chico's talking points is that the city's unsheltered population has suffered from something they call "toxic compassion." The idea is that by attempting to help, a "culture" of drug dependence and camping by choice is being "enabled." According to this logic, if camping is banned and clean needles aren't available, then people will find shelter beds and get the mental health and addiction treatments they need. It's a domestic version of the discourse of "deterrence" at the southern border: the idea that treating people with some modicum of humanity encourages them to take risky journeys. Cruelty, therefore, is the greater compassion.

Just like at the border, Chico's crackdown, alongside its failure to provide services and affordable housing, is having fatal results. Makeshift memorials and a mural have cropped up around town to commemorate the lives lost. Local housing rights activists estimate that close to 20 unsheltered people in their small city have died in less than a year. Some on the streets, others in hospital or temporary shelters.

One, a 30-year-old man who survived the Paradise fire, died in a hail of police bullets. Since the fire, Stephen Vest had struggled with homelessness, addiction, and mental health challenges. According to friends, he attempted to get help several times, but Chico's social services were overloaded. Last October, he experienced some sort of psychotic break and was brandishing a knife in a Petco. Three police officers showed up and tried to subdue him with a Taser. Then they shot him 11 times.

It would be far too causal to claim that Vest was a delayed victim of the wildfire, two years after the fact. A web of factors clearly contributed to his death. But the events are not unrelated either. As Laura Cootsona, executive director of the nonprofit Jesus Center told The Guardian, "Natural disasters are a new ticket to homelessness, particularly in California. It always disproportionately hits those who are already on the edge, who are paying too much for housing."

Some lose their homes to climate crisis-intensified fires or floods; some lose them in the aftermath those events, to climate gentrification.



Locks line the fence at Lookout Point on the skyway overlooking Butte Creek Canyon just outside Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021. Many people placed locks here in memory of those who died in the Camp Fire. *Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept*

Criminalizing People

Chico's war on unhoused people has gotten so extreme that several of its victims are now suing the city for its "methodical encampment eviction and property confiscation efforts," winning a temporary injunction against the sweeps. Last week, a federal judge in Sacramento extended the ban, arguing that the city's monthslong campaign to clear unhoused people from parks and other public lands violated legal precedent and possibly the Constitution. At the heart of his ruling is a 2018 case, Martin v. City of Boise, in which a Ninth Circuit panel ruled that local governments cannot prevent unhoused people from camping or sleeping on public property if they are not providing viable alternatives, like suitable shelter beds, or a sanctioned camping area. (In addition to a shortage of beds, some unhoused people say they can't use traditional shelters due to tight curfews that can conflict with paid work, or policies that separate couples from each other, or health concerns.)

The ordinances Chico City Council passed to crack down on people sleeping in parks and sitting or lying on the streets, Senior U.S. District Judge Morrison C. England Jr. said, were "in violation of Martin v. Boise," noting, "You can't justify the ordinances that are violating the United States Constitution."

Declaring himself "stunned where we are right now," the Republican appointee, who has been serving as a judge in California courts for 25 years, told the city's lawyer: "You can't do what you're doing. You're criminalizing people … because they don't have a place to live." He instructed the parties to come together and find a shelter solution within the law. Undaunted, the council immediately voted down a motion to explore sites for sanctioned camping.

That motion was introduced by Councilmember Scott Huber, one of two opponents of the sweeps. Huber said that the end goal of the crackdown is not actually to encourage people to use shelters but rather to make life so unbearable for unsheltered people that they "just finally get so tired or so sick that they leave town, or worse." This aligns with the ACLU's assessment: "Rather than expand shelter capacity and services, Chico City Council is actively working to dismantle existing resources and thwarting efforts to create new ones."

Winslow, the local housing justice organizer, told me that it all comes back to the booming housing market and the hope of turning Chico into "a luxury enclave" for big city professionals looking for a lifestyle upgrade; Chico's unhoused poor, routinely smeared as criminal "vagrants," are simply getting in the way.

A mural by Ali Meders-Knight with the words "Wassa Honi Mep" ("Keep your heart's intentions good") is seen in Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021.
Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

This process of removal has harrowing historical echoes for one group of residents: members of the federally recognized Mechoopda Indian Tribe, whose traditional territories include the parks and creeks in what is now called the city of Chico. When thousands of settlers flooded into California in search of gold in the mid-1800s, it was Indigenous tribes, including the Mechoopda, who were seen as the greatest barrier to overnight riches. Under the official policy of removal, bands of white militias raided Indigenous villages and massacred indiscriminately, often trading body parts for cash rewards. Several noted historians have argued that these blood-soaked decades in California clearly meet the international definition of genocide, since the often stated goal was extermination of the "red devils."

One particularly potent tool for removing Indigenous people in this period was simply labeling them as "vagrants." Historian James Rawls explains that under California's Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, "Any white person … could declare Indians who were simply strolling about, who were not gainfully employed, to be vagrants, and take that charge before a justice of the peace, and a justice of the peace would then have those Indians seized and sold at public auction. And the person who bought them would have their labor for four months without compensation."

When I asked Ali Meders-Knight, a prominent Mechoopda tribal member and traditional ecological educator, what she made of the new council's crusade against the latest group of people to be labeled "vagrants," she was irate, and not only because she said that Indigenous people are overrepresented among the unhoused. Referring to the police, uprooting under city orders Chico's poorest and most vulnerable residents from camps lining creeks in public parks, she said: "You did that to my ancestors. You ripped them from those creeks. This was the hub of the Indian killings." The echoes with earlier eras of removal are, she said, impossible to ignore. "I have heard people say [of Chico's homeless], 'Load them up in trains and ship them to the desert.' The language is almost the same. There is a historical story here. And it didn't start with the Camp Fire. It started in 1850."

A mural by Ali Meders-Knight, a practitioner of traditional ecological knowledge and a member of the Mechoopda tribe, is seen in Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021.
Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

Katy Thoma, the Chico Chamber of Commerce president, seems determined to make Meders-Knight's case for her. In February, she gave an unusually blunt interview to local reporter Natalie Hanson, who has been doggedly covering the housing crisis for the Chico Enterprise-Record: "Every single day, we were having to step over people to get into our office in the day. … From an operational standpoint, it's not OK for them to be sleeping in front of somebody's doorway and affecting their (the business owner's) ability to conduct business." When the body of an unsheltered person was found near the Chamber, Thoma said, it was "very traumatizing." Recalling this remark, Meders-Knight's voice shook with rage: "You're traumatized?" she said. "Learn something about our historical trauma."

Thoma's attitude does not represent all of Chico, of course, which has a large progressive community, much of which is solidly working class. Many recognize that the far greater trauma is losing one's home and being continuously uprooted and harassed by police — on top of navigating a pandemic and very possibly having survived one of the region's wildfires (not to mention the many more intimate traumas that have marked so many unsheltered people's lives).

After a corpse was found outside her house, Chico resident Heather Bonea wrote a wrenching Facebook post reflecting on what had happened to her city: "A man died outside my home yesterday. Less than 50 feet from my door, he lay down in the night under the eaves of a church with nothing more than some heavy boots and a blanket. He never woke up. He died in the early hours of the morning and lay there until the afternoon before anyone noticed. … It is 1,000 kinds of wrong. But, dammit, I could have brought him an effing sleeping bag. There is nothing right about letting someone die alone on the cold concrete. At some point, we have to come to terms with the atrocities we commit, whether they be through ignorance, negligence, avoidance, or violence."

It's reactions like this that convince Alex Brown there is still hope Chico could choose a different path. The city that welcomed its soot-covered neighbors from Paradise with that "blanket of love" is still there, underneath the get-tough rhetoric. She says Chicoans voted for promises of cleanliness and safety, but now that they are seeing the human cost of trying to achieve those goals through force, many are "having a harder time looking away." Yes, most want Chico's parks and waterways to be clean, but that desire coexists with support for affordable homes and mental health programs for the hundreds currently falling through the cracks.

The "Welcome to Paradise" sign just outside Paradise, Calif., on May 4, 2021.
Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

So Much for May Flowers

The challenge in Chico, as in so many other communities, is that people are beaten down by serial disasters: wave after wave of Covid-19, fire after fire, layoff after layoff. Jessie Mercer, who made that phoenix sculpture out of keys for the fire's one-year anniversary, described the community at the two-year mark not as a mythical bird rising from the ashes but as "soul tired." And there is no reason to assume that the pressures are going to let up any time soon. After a hot spring and deep into a drought, much of the Northwest is bracing for yet another catastrophic wildfire season.

"Here we go again," Mark Stemen, the Chico State geography professor, emailed me last week, after the National Weather Service issued a "Red Flag Warning" for a region that includes Chico and Paradise. Low humidity and powerful winds had combined to create "critical fire weather conditions." Stemen said he couldn't remember getting a red flag warning "this early in the year." The email's subject line was "so much for May flowers."

In a context this incendiary, both ecologically and socially, what is needed is not one-off aid from the government, Stemen told me, but intelligent policies designed to sustain social solidarities after the initial shock of a disaster. He stresses that Chico's current divisions are the result of overlapping system failures: the failure to treat climate change as a true crisis and radically lower emissions accordingly, and the failure to support communities like Chico that are on the front lines of climate crisis-induced migration.

Mark Stemen, a professor of environmental studies at California State University, Chico, poses for a portrait in Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021. Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

"We need to fireproof the homes and thin the trees around the forested communities," he said, referring to the changes required to "harden" buildings in fire-prone towns like Paradise. "But what about the valley towns, the destination of climate refugees? We can't harden our hearts to combat compassion fatigue. How do we increase our community's compassion stamina?"

Compassion stamina. That's a helpful way of thinking about the goal of public policy in our era of serial shocks. What that would mean for starters, Stemen said, is major investments in affordable housing, as well as in mental health to cope with the trauma of more frequent disasters. He also said there needs to be reliable financing for the kind of mutual aid efforts that tend to burn bright during the peak of a crisis and then burn out, in part because they are under-resourced. "What if government could lend support while letting the community maintain some self-determination?"

"We can't harden our hearts to combat compassion fatigue. How do we increase our community's compassion stamina?"

Addison Winslow, who was a part of Chico's mutual aid organizing after the Camp Fire and has been working closely with the city's unsheltered community, told me that it all comes down to building out more affordable housing of all kinds, fast — public, non-market, apartments, tiny homes — while removing the many zoning and regulatory barriers that favor single-family homes over multi-unit structures. And since we know that neither Covid-19 nor the Camp Fire will be Northern California's last disasters, he argues that it makes sense to "overbuild housing" so that communities have some shock absorbers when the next wave of displacement, inevitably, hits. Right now, he said, "We aren't preparing cities to take in the people that we will need to, given the fact that climate change is already pushing people around. People are going to want to have bikeable and walkable communities with affordable housing. We have to prepare."

That's a warning that extends far beyond Chico. Wildfires, hurricanes, sea level rise, and crop failure are already driving migration globally, some of it between nations but much of it within them. Projecting the impact of climate disruption on migration is necessarily inexact, since so much depends on how much global emissions are reduced in the coming decade. But even under best-case emission scenarios, sea level rise and coastal flooding alone will likely force many millions to move. Figuring out how to absorb sudden influxes of new neighbors with decency and hospitality — whether they are fleeing hurricanes in Honduras or fires in Paradise — is a central challenge of our age. Daniel Aldana Cohen, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and an expert on green housing, told me that "there is going to be another Great Migration. So where are people going to move to? What are the conditions in which moving is less traumatizing?"

It some ways, the question boils down to this: What kinds of public policies will support more people living on less land *without* turning on each other — and how can those policies simultaneously dramatically lower emissions so that the habitable space for humanity does not contract well beyond survivability? To put it another way: How do we rapidly decrease carbon emissions and economic and social stresses all at the same time?

Butte Creek Canyon, which was damaged in the Camp Fire, is seen outside Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021. *Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept*

Genuine Systematic Changes

Attempts to answer these questions are at the center of the flurry of renewed and revamped Green New Deal bills and resolutions introduced by members of the so-called Squad, all designed to push President Joe Biden to significantly increase his green infrastructure investments, rely less on market mechanisms like tax credits and more on direct granting to communities and expand his definition of infrastructure to include the kinds of social supports that encourage solidarity and discourage criminalization.

There is New York Rep. Jamaal Bowman's "Care for All Agenda," a resolution introduced with Sen. Elizabeth Warren, that would make major investments in mental health supports as well as all forms of social care and support. Bowman wrote of the resolution that "care investments are a crucial part of transformative climate action. … In fact, care jobs should be thought of as green jobs: they are already relatively low-carbon, and are becoming even more essential as we cope with the health impacts of climate change."

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Bernie Sanders also just reintroduced their Green New Deal for Public Housing Act, which calls for well over $100 billion to be spent rebuilding and reimagining the country's long-neglected government-owned buildings, transforming them into hubs for decarbonization and job creation. Though mostly focused on revamping existing housing stock, it would also clear the way for new public housing to be built in communities like Chico where the need is severe. The Climate and Community Project released a report alongside the bill, stating, "We need a massive federal investment that would finally provide American public housing communities with healthy, comfortable, energy-efficient homes — fighting racism,

unemployment, the housing crisis, and the climate emergency at the same time and in the same places, and building out badly needed green community infrastructure." Once again, the goal is to push Biden to significantly increase the portion of his infrastructure budget devoted to public housing.

Rep. Cori Bush, D-Mo., speaks during a news conference held to reintroduce the Green New Deal at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., on April 20, 2021. Photo: Sarah Silbiger/Getty Images

Most relevant for Chico, perhaps, is the bill just introduced by first-term Rep. Cori Bush and co-sponsored by Ocasio-Cortez: the Green New Deal for Cities, Counties, States, Tribes, and Territories. The plan would direct $1 trillion in financing over four years to local governments with their own Green New Deal plans. The bill prioritizes affordable housing of all kinds, including transitional housing while upgrades are taking place, and it requires that participating governments take steps to prevent rising housing costs including through "rent control, rent stabilization, and other methods to prevent gentrification and stabilize property values." It also specifically says that the financing cannot go to policing.

All of this is precisely the opposite of what has been happening in Chico, which has allowed housing costs to soar and looked to police to manage the fallout.

"We introduced the Green New Deal for Cities as a core piece of our efforts to legislate in defense of Black lives," Bush told me. And she stressed that the crises it seeks to address impact all communities, including majority-white towns like Paradise and Chico. "This legislation, which makes massive investments in environmental justice, climate infrastructure, and housing are exactly designed for towns like Chico, California that need urgent federal support in the face of climate catastrophe. … Every city and town needs a Green New Deal to provide massive investments in climate and environmental justice rather than ineffective solutions to public safety that further criminalize and perpetuate harm on our most vulnerable communities."

Would a program like that have made a difference in Chico? Would it have helped it to sustain that spirit of solidarity and mutual aid that was so powerful in the early weeks and months after the Camp Fire? I put those questions to Alex Brown. Her response was that it would have changed everything. "The money is really what I think local communities are starving for in order to make these genuine systematic changes." Her Chico Green New Deal initiative stalled out, Brown recalled, "because of the lack of financing available to move those initiatives forward" — while her opponents hammered away at the claim that green infrastructure represents an impossible expense. But, she said, Bush's plan would supply "the funding necessary, and all it requires of us is a little bit of innovation. … It lets us use our imaginations, use what we know about our community and our challenges and assets to make something happen."

With so much moving at the federal level, and the courts pushing back against the hard-line approach to Chico's housing crisis, Brown holds out hope that the vision she put forward in 2019 could get a second chance. The local Sunrise chapter has spent the spring holding demonstrations calling for green jobs and clean energy. "We've got no shortage of work to do to address the climate crisis and design a better society that works for all of us," Sunrise organizer Amanda Reilly said. "Some of the work ahead includes building smart power grids, training and constructing buildings to achieve maximum efficiency, decarbonizing our transportation and agricultural sectors, cleaning up hazardous waste sites and habitat restoration."

A view of Butte Creek Canyon outside Chico, Calif., on May 4, 2021.

Photo: Salgu Wissmath for The Intercept

A few of these initiatives are already underway. One of the most exciting climate-related projects in Chico is led by Ali Meders-Knight. She has been working with state and federal agencies to reintroduce traditional Indigenous land stewardship practices, including native plant

species that are fire and drought adapted, as well as the practice of "cultural fire": careful, controlled burns that prevent excessive dry vegetation from building up and wildfires from burning out of control. She has trained more than 100 students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in various forms of traditional ecological knowledge as part of a certification program with Chico State.

The trouble, as Stemen points out, is that you can have all kinds of ecological work programs, but unless some of those workers are also building and retrofitting a whole lot of inexpensive green housing, "there won't be anywhere for those young workers to live."

The stakes in figuring this out are high. "This is only going to get worse over time," Brown said. "The more natural disasters that you have — especially in areas like Paradise that were home to some of our lower income communities — the less access to resources that people have, and it's going to start crumbling even more. So if we don't prioritize wellbeing, which is the critical message behind the Green New Deal, then it's going to get darker. And these problems are only going to become more glaring."

It's a test for the small but growing city of Chico — and for the country as a whole. Because this is a progressive community in a Democratic state run by a governor who has positioned himself as a climate leader in a country now led by a president who campaigned on fighting climate change and creating good green jobs. If Chico can't forge a path out of fire that seriously battles carbon pollution and spiraling poverty, while beginning to repair historical harm, it's hard to see who can.

This piece drew on forthcoming research on post-Camp Fire displacement by Jacquelyn Chase, professor of geography and planning, and Peter Hansen, information technology consultant, both at California State University, Chico.