

Buffer zone planned to protect Marysville

- **Michael Bachelard**
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MARYSVILLE would be ringed by a 500-metre-wide buffer zone cleared of trees in a rebuilding plan advanced by local leaders and endorsed by bushfire experts.

But there is growing concern among the surviving residents of Marysville that the new building code for fire-prone areas will restrict its reconstruction to suburban-style housing in an area which only thrived as a tourism destination because of its natural, and built, beauty.

Marysville, the town hardest hit by the February 7 bushfires, is preparing for the first arrivals of the general public tomorrow after 10 days of resident-only access.

Local member Fran Bailey told *The Sunday Age* that the State Government's new building code was "totally inappropriate" for Marysville.

"People are very angry about it and very worried. They've said to me, 'If we're forced to have a concrete slab and brick veneer, who'd want to come here?'"

The Government's Building Commission chief, Sarah McCann-Bartlett, assured residents that people could still build "charming designs" under the new rules.

The Government architect is scrambling to produce some model designs to try to defuse the growing criticism of the code.

But Ms Bailey, the Liberal member for McEwan, hit back, saying the Building Commission could "talk their heads off about it" but the same councils that prosecuted residents for clearing trees from their land would be responsible for issuing permits.

Ms Fray also believes insurance companies, which would be undertaking some of the rebuilding, would go for mass-produced housing to reduce costs.

Richard Blythe, the head of architecture and design at RMIT University, has called on all parties to "slow down" to allow time to think about how the town might be rebuilt.

"We are seeing a gross overreaction and willingness to jump to solutions while, at the moment, it's not clear what successful solutions might be," Professor Blythe said. He called on the architectural community to come together with authorities and residents to talk about the issues.

"There is a huge willingness among universities, the professions themselves, to participate in that process of reimagining," Professor Blythe said.

"But it's about the people who live there realising their dreams, visions, aims about how they feel about their place."

The president of the Marysville Tourism Association, Graeme Brown, said the town should be surrounded by a 500-metre-wide "green strip", with walking paths, picnic areas and bike paths, to protect it from the nearby forest.

Landscape architect Lisle Rudolph backed Mr Brown's proposal. "You can't have a forest coming up to a settlement and expect to survive," he said.

Mr Rudolph, who co-wrote the 2003 book *Landscape and Building Design for Bushfire Areas*, said the strip needed to be substantial to minimise the risk of embers crossing it. The buffer could be used for vegetable gardens, sports fields, tennis courts or parks.

Professor Blythe said a buffer zone around Marysville could be "part of the mix" and, as part of an

environmentally sustainable village, could include some productive farmland.

The Building Commission is conducting a roadshow to explain the fire-resistant building code to affected residents.

Archicentre chief David Hallett, who is selling the merits of the code at public meetings, said there were many misconceptions about how restrictive it was.

"We certainly haven't mandated brick veneer boxes on concrete slabs. The message is that there are alternatives but people might need to dig a little deeper with their architects and builders," he said.