

NEWS > LOCAL NEWS

Upper ridge escape route handles first test



A sign in January at Inskip says the Skyway isn't maintained during winter. (Bill Husa — Enterprise-Record file photo)

By **STEVE SCHOONOVER** | sschoonover@chicoer.com | Chico

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The road project that was sometimes billed as an “escape route” for Magalia and the upper Paradise ridge met its first test, according to Butte County.

The Upper Skyway was a twisting gravel road between Inskip and Butte Meadows in 2008, when the Humboldt Fire burned into Paradise. Residents and local officials had been agitating for years to get the road improved to a level that a typical passenger car could navigate it, without success.

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But the fire that burned 74 homes in southern Paradise and at one point closed all the roads out of town to the south, emphasized the need for another way off the ridge.

Then-congressman Wally Herger, R-Chico, was convinced to drop his resistance to earmarking Federal Highway Administration funding to specific projects, and secured three rounds of money to get the road straightened and paved.

The road was eligible for the funds because it provides access to national forest lands; the road is also known as Forest Highway 171.

Work began in September 2009, and the third phase of work was completed in October 2013. The cost for the 9.6 miles of improvements was \$21 million, with about \$1 million of that coming from local funds.

But since then, it hasn't been put to the evacuation test. That changed Thursday, as the Camp Fire had roared into Paradise.

Magalia was included in the areas ordered to evacuate. On Friday the evacuation

According to Butte County Assistant Public Works Director Bradley Ott, the road seemed to work pretty well. But when contacted on Friday the evacuation was still continuing, so, “the answer to that question is evolving.”

He said there was a “decent traffic flow” as of 7-8 p.m. Thursday, and there was some “good, bad and indifferent.”

One thing the county did was to post a gasoline tanker truck along the route, to fill up people who were running short. “I don’t know how many took advantage of it, but we did help a few people out.”

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Steve Schoonover

Steve Schoonover is the city editor of the Enterprise-Record and Oroville Mercury-Register. A resident of Chico since 1963 and a 1975 graduate of Chico State University, he has been with the E-R since 1980.

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