

Council Study Session

April 6, 2021

Agenda Item	Wildfire Safety Commission Recommendations	
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Item Type	Requested by Council <input type="checkbox"/> Update <input type="checkbox"/> Request for Direction <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation x	

SUMMARY

While Ashland's local and regional wildfire risk has long been known, and significant City and community efforts and progress have been made, the Alameda Fire is a stark reminder of the reality of Ashland's vulnerability and the pressing need to mitigate and manage wildfire hazards on an accelerated timeline. The Wildfire Safety Commission continues to be a resource to the Council as it considers and determines the allocation of resources focused on reducing Ashland's wildfire risk as quickly as possible.

In response to the recent devastating Alameda Fire, the Wildfire Safety Commission met several times and updated a set of recommendations that were originally offered as part of the Biennium (BN) 2019-21 budget process and subsequently presented to Council on November 2, 2020. The Wildfire Safety Commission requests that these recommendations be reviewed by the Council as part of the biennial budget process and priority setting occurring beyond the budget process.

POLICIES, PLANS & GOALS SUPPORTED

City Council Goal: Address Climate Change, Reduce Wildfire and Smoke Risk

City Plans: Ashland Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan, Community Wildfire Protection Plan, 2016 Ashland Forest Plan, 2017 Climate and Energy Action Plan

BACKGROUND AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The City of Ashland has a long and significant history of preparing the community for wildfire. The City is a lead partner in the 13,000-acre Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship Project, which mitigates wildfire risk to Ashland's municipal watershed, surrounding forests, and the community itself.

Ashland Fire & Rescue (AF&R) has developed a comprehensive program called [Fire Adapted Ashland](#) to house all resources and information on community wildfire safety. Wildfire Division staff have been conducting free one-hour home wildfire risk assessments since 2010 and manage 35 Firewise Communities and various fuel reduction grants. In 2018, AF&R staff conducted wildfire risk assessments on approximately 6,600 homes to help prioritize future mitigation and to educate homeowners individually through postcard mailings and property-specific reports available at fireadaptedashland.org.

The City of Ashland has also completed significant efforts towards Ashland's Evacuation Plan; in 2005 posted evacuation route signs and began educating homeowners about evacuation preparedness. The City has trained CERT volunteers in evacuation procedures since 2007 and hosted mock evacuation drills in 2008 and 2019. The City joined the nationally recognized Ready, Set, Go! Evacuation program in 2014 and uses this program to educate Ashland residents about evacuation through signage, during home wildfire assessments, and through the annual Wildfire Preparedness Campaign (2019, 2020). The

City joined Citizen Alert (reverse 911) in 2013, and carried the system over to Nixle in 2018, where over 15,000 residents have signed up to receive important evacuation and alert information.

Though significant efforts are ongoing as listed above, the pace of work is insufficient to address the worsening risk associated with climate change and weighed against the risk to the city's economy, housing stock, and threat to public safety. The proposed enhancements would allow the Department to deliver added program capacity to accelerate the changes needed that would allow Ashland to adapt to this emergency on a timeframe commensurate with the threat and values at risk.

FISCAL IMPACTS

While the Commission worked with Ashland Fire and Rescue staff to provide preliminary cost estimates for each recommend action, more detailed financial analysis is needed to provide more accurate assessments of cost across each of the listed recommendations. Additionally, City staff from multiple departments have been examining how some recommended actions can be accomplished within the existing budget appropriations of multiple City departments.

It is the intent of the Commission that these recommendations serve as a consideration for setting priorities and the upcoming budget process in 2021 where added programs, staff, and capacity would need additional funding. Investments in wildfire prevention and mitigation challenge the current budgetary resources, but the risk clearly exists for far greater costs to the City and the community during and after a wildfire.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- With the BN 2021-23 budget process already underway and general fund resources extremely strained, how would Council like to approach the recommendations provided by the Wildfire Safety Commission?
 - Staff review and assessment of a range of options for each recommendation?
 - Incorporation of one or more expenditure requests into the budget review process?
 - Accept recommendations and schedule focused Council discussion/decision upon completion of the BN 2021-23 budget approval process?
- Does Council have additional wildfire preparedness/prevention recommendations or requests for staff analysis and report back to Council beyond those of the Wildfire Safety Commission?

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS:

Staff suggests Council provide direction on the list of recommendations and prioritize preferred actions for additional financial and operational analysis from Ashland Fire & Rescue, Finance, and Administration staff for further discussion at an upcoming Council meeting. This Council direction and associated analysis can assist in ongoing budget preparations for the BN 2021-2023 budget.

Post-Alameda Fire Recommendations to City Council from the Ashland Wildfire Safety Commission

The September 8, 2020 Alameda Fire showed us how vulnerable Ashland and neighboring communities are to the disastrous consequences of extreme wildfire. It is imperative that we respond by investing in wildfire mitigation activities proven to be most effective in motivating and enabling residents and businesses to prepare for wildfires entering the City.

The WSC recognizes that the City of Ashland is facing difficult financial decisions between the income reductions of COVID-19, PERS, and other factors. The threat of wildfire needs to be factored into those decisions. We suggest that the recommendations below be viewed as a non-optional insurance policy, to increase Ashland's physical and financial resiliency when future wildfires occur. Costs will be determined as part of the Central Services budget.

We are dividing wildfire mitigation here into five categories: (1) "fire-adapted community" activities, (2) hazardous vegetation and fuels abatement in developed areas, (3) emergency response and evacuations preparedness, (4) fuels treatments in the Ashland Watershed, and (5) fire prevention.

The summary of our recommendations follows, with details starting on page 3:

Fire-Adapted Communities Program Expansion Activities; this is our top priority

Recommendation 1: Substantially expand the Fire Adapted Communities (FAC) Program. Cost estimate: \$70K annually.

Recommendation 2: Update the Ashland Community Wildfire Preparedness Plan (CWPP). Cost est: \$40,000 one-time expenditure for a major update.

Recommendation 3: Fill the City's vacant Communications and Community Engagement position as soon as possible. Cost is identified in the City's budget plan.

Hazardous Vegetation and Fuels Abatement in Developed Areas

Recommendation 4: Abate a back-log of hazardous vegetation and fuels in developed areas throughout the City. Cost est: \$200,000/year for 5 years.

Recommendation 5: Submit a request letter from Ashland's City Council to the Jackson County Commissioners requesting that the County expand its current weed abatement ordinance. Cost est: City Council and City staff time.

Recommendation 6: Establish a pilot project fund to test partnering with private landowners outside of city limits to abate hazardous vegetation and fuels that are a threat to the City of Ashland. Cost est: \$20,000/year for 2-5 years. (This funding request is only necessary if Jackson County does not respond favorably to a request to change the weed abatement ordinance proposed in recommendation 5.)

Recommendation 7: Clarify requirements for mitigation of hazardous vegetation and fuels within City limits in Chapter 9.04 of the municipal code.

Emergency Response and Evacuations Preparedness

Recommendation 8: Improve evacuation route safety and availability. Cost est: TBD.

Recommendation 9: Create additional seasonal mitigation and firefighting capacity by staffing a Type 6 Engine with a three-person wildfire crew. Est: \$50,000/year.

Recommendation 10: Increase frequency and intensity of evacuation training, planning, and response. Equipment acquisition, est: \$75,000/one time.

Recommendation 11: Restrict parking on critical streets during red-flag days.

Ashland Forest Resilience and Watershed Fuels Treatments Program

Recommendation 12: Increase funding for the Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship Project to match acreage needing treatment. Cost: \$175,000 additional funding annually

Fire Prevention

Recommendation 13: Expand the drone program to the greenway and other known traveler encampments. Cost est: \$8,000-10,000 annually.

Recommendation Details

Fire-Adapted Community Program Expansion

Recommendation 1: Substantially expand the Fire Adapted Communities (FAC) Program by piloting a suite of activities that have proven most effective in preparing communities to live with wildfire. Additional capacity is needed to implement the improvements described below. Cost estimate: \$70K annually.

Ashland's FAC program needs to grow substantially to increase capacity. We recommend hiring a full-time wildfire mitigation program assistant (est. \$70,000/year) to facilitate and coordinate citizen and business engagement in wildfire mitigation activities. The expanded FAC program will:

- Promote *face-to-face* wildfire preparedness communications with residents and businesses throughout Ashland before, during and after wildfire. (Recent research shows that personal interaction has proven to be the most effective way to motivate property owners to do work to make their properties safer from wildfire compared to brochures and websites.)
- Regularly update Ashland's citywide curbside wildfire risk assessments and maintain the community risk assessment database.
- Advise Firewise Communities and other neighborhood wildfire preparedness partnerships.
- Implement a program to recruit, train, and track the progress of a core of volunteers to facilitate wildfire mitigation education, focusing on business and neighborhood-specific activities.
- Provide customized wildfire mitigation learning materials and opportunities for service providers (e.g. landscapers, builders, realtors), and track certifications issued at these trainings.
- Liaise with Community Development for compliance with City ordinances.
- Monitor and track FAC program accomplishments to enable effective and efficient investment of time and resources. Prepare annual reports.

Recommendation 2: Update the Ashland Community Wildfire Preparedness Plan (CWPP). It is well understood that CWPPs need to be living documents that serve as roadmaps and agreements within each city describing how they will prepare for wildfires. Ashland's CWPP is 16 years old and is now seriously out of date. Cost est:\$40,000

Since our 2004 CWPP was drafted, social science studies have revealed new information clarifying what motivates people to act in high wildfire risk areas. The environment in Ashland has also changed significantly, partly due to climate change, but also because over 12,000 acres of successful fuels treatment have occurred in the Ashland Watershed, a citywide curbside risk assessment has been completed, and the Alameda Fire has dramatically altered the public's perspective on wildfire risk in developed areas. The updating process outlined below will require a small investment of time and resources relative to its immediate and long-lasting impact on the community. Updating the CWPP requires that the City of Ashland:

- Form an ad hoc CWPP committee to develop a scope of work, identify needs, outline a plan, and identify updating responsibilities. The committee should be composed of representatives from multiple commissions and relevant community leaders.
- Secure funding for a part-time project coordinator and lead author from the local community (~\$40,000 for outreach and engagement expenses and document layout and production).

- Insure adequate professional staff time to participate and contribute to the updating process (e.g., Fire, Community Development, Parks and Rec., GIS services, etc.).
- Develop and implement a plan/process to enable and empower residents and business owners to become major players in the plan's updating.
- Target completion date is March 2022 (COVID-19 restrictions permitting).

Recommendation 3: Fill the City's vacant Communications and Community Engagement position as soon as possible. This position provides essential communications and civic engagement activities across all departments.

We suggest the job description be revised to strongly emphasize public affairs, consistent and coordinated messaging, and public education and engagement in planning and decision making. Social science studies have found that engaging the public in dialog about complex issues and uncertain conditions helps the learning process and builds trust—essential conditions that lead to action. A significant percentage of the communications manager job should be dedicated to emergency preparedness, enabling effective communications during challenging times, and living with wildfire.

Hazardous Vegetation and Fuels Abatement

Recommendation 4: Abate a back-log of hazardous vegetation and fuels in developed areas throughout the City in a 5 year program to create more defensible space around homes and businesses and on City property.

We recommend creating a “wildfire safety fund” to finance special projects that would remove hazardous vegetation and fuels within City limits. This five-year program would assist Ashland residents and businesses not benefiting from the upcoming FEMA grant funding to mitigate a significant backlog of hazardous vegetation and fuels so that we can move to a maintenance mode. Reducing the fuel load within the City will significantly increase the probability that Ashland homes and businesses will not be lost when wildfire enters the City. This time-limited special project fund would:

- Provide cost-sharing incentives on properties not receiving FEMA funds, for home hardening and fuels reduction work.
- Assist low income homeowners to comply with City's weed abatement ordinance
- Greatly expand opportunities to dispose of hazardous vegetation and fuels beyond the current single spring free debris disposal day.
- Cost amounts to \$250 per acre, per year, within Ashland City limits

Recommendation 5. Submit a request letter from Ashland's City Council to the Jackson County Commissioners requesting that the County expand the current weed abatement ordinance.

We recommend that the expanded ordinance include hazardous vegetation and fuels, and that it allow the City of Ashland to enforce the City's weed abatement ordinance within ¼ mile of Ashland's city limit.

Recommendation 6. Establish a pilot project to test partnering with private landowners outside of city limits to abate hazardous vegetation and fuels that are a threat to the City of Ashland.

The Alameda fire demonstrated how fast-moving fires are a significant threat to Ashland's homes. Properties located within city limits are subject to a weed abatement ordinance within city limits. Weed abatement efforts outside the city, however, have shown little progress to date. To reduce the potential for wildfires starting and spreading on private properties adjacent to City of Ashland properties, we propose establishing a trial 50% cost sharing relationship with private landowners within ¼ mile of the city boundary to create a fine fuels abatement buffer around the city.

Pilot fuel reduction treatments could include grazing, controlled burning, biochar burning, and/or vegetation cutting in strategic areas. This pilot would be implemented by a combination of existing and proposed staff (e.g., FAC Assistant recommend in 1. above) to create agreements with property owners and contracts to carry out work. We estimate \$20,000/year is needed to successfully implement the pilot.

Funds for this pilot project will not be needed if Jackson County is convinced to expand the county's weed abatement ordinance. See recommendation 5.

Recommendation 7: Clarify requirements for mitigation of hazardous vegetation and fuels within City limits in Chapter 9.04 of the municipal code.

The City of Ashland municipal code does not contain sufficiently clear language to enforce removal of "hazardous vegetation and fuels" within city limits, particularly on vacant lots. Proposed ordinance changes are under development by the WSC and should be ready for Council consideration in December 2020.

Emergency Response and Evacuation Preparedness

Recommendation 8: Improve Evacuation Route Safety and Availability

- Explore potential locations for emergency-only gravel road connections to Interstate
- Prior to next fire season, City of Ashland prioritizes identifying all egress roads serving neighborhoods that only have a single way out.
- Clear vegetation on both sides of such roads to facilitate safer evacuations during a wildfire.

Recommendation 9: Create additional seasonal mitigation and firefighting capacity by staffing a Type 6 Engine with a three-person wildfire crew

A Type 6 engine with a 3-person crew is optimal for initial attack on off-roads wildfires or for patrolling for illegal fire activity. A seasonally staffed engine crew adds capacity during fire season at minimal cost. When not working a fire, seasonal staff would perform wildfire mitigation work throughout the city such as proposed in the *Hazardous Vegetation and Fuels Abatement* recommendation. Staffing three firefighters for 12 weeks would cost ~\$50,000.

We suggest that one of the members of the three-person engine staff could be the FAC Assistant (Recommendation 1).

Recommendation 10: Increase frequency and intensity of evacuation training, planning, and response (\$75,000)

An additional \$75,000 is requested to fund a SIM table and associated software. The SIM table would allow city emergency personnel to run countless scenarios for evacuation planning, and allow the public to view real-time, web-based evacuation mapping in an emergency.

The Communications/Civic Engagement Manager (Recommendation 3) should play a key role in disseminating evacuation information to the public before, during, and after a wildfire.

Recommendation 11: On red flag warning days, implement parking restrictions on key roads to allow for adequate ingress/egress for engines in and resident evacuations out.

We have approximately 5-10 red flag days every summer. Instituting new parking restrictions on those days would require educating the public, including tourists, and enforcement by the Police Department.

Installation of appropriate signs would probably also be needed on affected roads.

Ashland Forest Resilience and Watershed Fuels Treatments Program

Recommendation 12: Increase funding for the Ashland Forest Resilience Project to maintain areas already treated.

The Ashland Forest Resiliency (AFR) Project is supported by a water user assessment that began in BN 2013- 15 at \$175,000 per year to fund and maintain in perpetuity the 7,600-acre project area on U.S. Forest Service land adjacent to town and containing the City's lower watershed. AFR expanded in 2015 to ultimately include 5,000 more acres of private land surrounding Ashland. The projected maintenance costs on a decade cycle is estimated at \$380,000. The water utility assessment increased in 2019 to \$3.00 per month per household, but it covered staff salaries instead of the added workload.

The requested \$175,000 additional funds (double the current amount) for AFR fuels maintenance would provide enough funding to maintain project areas long-term. Private landowners with property in the project area would be required to split the fuels treatment maintenance costs.

Fire Prevention

Recommendation 13: Expand the drone program to the greenway and other known traveler encampments. Cost est: \$8,000-10,000 annually.