

Wildfire Safety Commission's Annual Report to City Council

Reporting Period: July 2021-June 2022

The Ashland Wildfire Safety Commission (WSC) has been very productive this past year despite COVID restrictions and staff transitions in Ashland Fire and Rescue (AF&R). Our beloved Katie Gible, the Fire-Adapted Communities Coordinator, resigned in June 2021 and was replaced with an equally competent and supportive departmental liaison--Brian Hendrix.

The WSC continues to leverage heightened public apprehension about the growing threat of catastrophic wildfire in Ashland. Successive years of unprecedented extreme wildfires in the West augment citizen concerns raised from the 2020 Alameda Fire. In response, the WSC approach was altered to emphasize personal engagement activities outside of monthly meetings. Small working groups have proven to be highly effective. On-going and new working-group accomplishment reports follow.

Nuisance Ordinance Amendments (on-going)

Proposed amendments to Chapter 9.04 of the Ashland Municipal Code, Weeds and Noxious Vegetation, were developed in October 2020 to facilitate more effective mitigation of "hazardous fuels" which is defined as excessive vegetation, living or dead, that significantly increases potential of structure ignition. Since the initial draft proposal was submitted for review to the City Attorney's office there have been delays due to staff changes and capacity issues within the City. Given these delays, we elected to step back and better define 'highly flammable' plants and refine plant spacing and maintenance requirements. The WSC passed a motion on May 18, 2022, to postpone the proposed AMC9.04 due to limited capacity to perform code enforcement and to better integrate the latest information on how homes ignite during wildfires. We also want to allow time for stakeholder review before the draft revisions are brought to City Council.

Annual Spring Wildfire Preparedness Campaign (on-going)

At the time of this report, we are in the middle of the 4th year of our Annual Spring Wildfire Preparedness Campaign. Sandwich boards, countertop displays, and posters are present at high traffic businesses throughout the City offering monthly themed flyers for home-hardening, fire-resistant landscaping, and evacuation and smoke preparedness. Commissioner Doug Kay is in his 6th successive year hosting a weekly wildfire preparedness table at Ashland's Farmers Market. Monthly themes have been announced through Ashland's Nixle community alert system, Facebook posts, and City news releases, and kindly promoted through engaged citizens and community leaders.

Thousands of flyers have been distributed to Ashland residents and businesses since the Spring Wildfire Preparedness Campaign's inception in April 2018. This is certainly an accomplishment, but research shows that face-to-face engagement with property owners is vastly more effective at motivating risk mitigation than passive messaging like flyers. In response to this research, the WSC has redirected its attention to initiatives that actively engage citizens and businesses in wildfire risk reduction efforts as follows:

- 1) providing one-on-one residential wildfire risk assessments;

- 2) evaluating opportunities to get “boots on the ground” to help citizens reduce their wildfire risk regardless of income or ability;
- 3) developing resources and guidance for fire-resistant landscaping best practices;
- 4) creating a directory of landscaping service providers familiar with fire-resistant landscaping best-practices;
- 5) expanding fire-resistant landscaping learning opportunities; and
- 6) exploring ways to facilitate neighborhood engagement in wildfire and evacuation preparedness.

Wildfire Risk Assessment Program (Newly operational)

The Commission’s Wildfire Risk Assessment Program (WRAP) became fully operational on October 1, 2021. Six volunteers were certified by AF&R to perform residential wildfire risk assessments within city limits. These volunteers have completed 154 residential property risk assessments in the first year of the program. This has increased Fire department capacity for these assessments by 470 percent! Volunteers provide customized education and recommendations to property owners and tenants. The program has become so popular that at the time of this report, more than 70 Ashland properties are on the waiting list. Working group members are also designing an improved digital assessment interface for volunteers, to streamline report generation and data collection, improve consistency, provide means to evaluate program effectiveness, and reduce AF&R staff time required for collecting data related to the FEMA grant project.

Wildfire Risk Reduction (BOOTS) Program (New)

Many of our citizens need assistance to reduce wildfire risk. The Wildfire Risk Reduction (BOOTS) Working Group was formed in early 2022 to focus on getting ‘boots’ on the ground through a not-for-profit organization. This organization will need to apply for and administer home-hardening and fuel reduction donations, grants, and loans for those with limited to no capacity, such as the elderly, disabled, and low income; and serve as a clearinghouse to connect construction and landscaping service providers with customers. The workgroup is investigating how other communities are meeting this need and looking for a local non-profit to serve as a wildfire risk mitigation clearinghouse.

Realty Engagement Program (on-going)

Through a partnership with the Rogue Valley Association of Realtors (RVAR), the WSC and AF&R supports wildfire risk recognition training for Rogue Valley realtors and licensed home inspectors through AF&R staff and NFPA hosted courses. In 2021, a grant from the National Association of Realtors supported development and distribution of wildfire risk educational materials to local realtors and paid for a 2-day, in-depth training of licensed home inspectors in our region by a National Fire Protection Association instructor. Additionally, AF&R staff held two introductory webinars for realtors on wildfire risk. 2022 continues to build upon the collaborative work of the past year, including two more introductory courses for realtors, one webinar in June, and one in-person class scheduled for October.

Fire-adapted Landscaping Program (Expanded)

This Working Group launched a multi-dimensional approach to promote fire-resistant landscaping, including:

- updated educational materials;
- online & in-person learning opportunities for service providers and the public;
- development of a Rogue Valley Landscaping Service Providers Directory, and
- critical review of the 2018 Ashland Firewise Plant List.

On Feb. 17, 2022, with the support of Southern Oregon Landscape Architects (SOLA) and Ashland Parks and Recreation, Commissioner Charisse Sydoriak and AF&R's Brian Hendrix presented a Fire-resistant Landscaping Class open to Rogue Valley Landscaping Service Providers. Twenty-six landscape service providers representing 18 businesses, along with five observers including one reporter, attended. Charisse was interviewed by the reporter who published an article based on this class in the Oregonian on March 31st. On April 6, 2022, nearly 100 members of the public attended an on-line presentation hosted by AF&R that covered much of the same material.

A Landscaping Service Providers Directory has been created. We are currently seeking a sponsoring entity to host the list online. In the meantime, service providers can add their business to the contractors list available at AF&R's fireadaptedashland.org.

An important component of fire-resistant landscaping is selecting plants that have low flammability. A comprehensive review of Ashland's 2018 Prohibited Flammable Plants List and recommended firewise plants revealed the need to update both lists. Revising these lists will be our focus in the coming months.

Neighborhood Engagement Program (New)

The new Neighborhood Engagement working group was formed in November 2021 to better understand and accelerate neighborhood-level progress in preparing homes for wildfire. Our initial focus is on engaging the 33 active NFPA (*National Fire Protection Association*) Firewise USA Communities in Ashland, which cover about 10 percent of the City's residential area. A survey was developed to gather feedback on community successes, challenges, and current status/motivation levels of each Firewise community. Our goal is to integrate lessons learned into future neighborhood engagement efforts for the benefit of all Ashland residents.

We learned that the most "successful" Firewise USA Communities are those whose members invest in group projects and have active leaders who are personally aware of individual member needs. The communities that face more "challenges" are those where many residents within their neighborhood feel that "no amount of work" (wildfire risk reduction work) will make a difference (an "it's all going to burn anyway" perception) and where the Firewise Resident Leader is shy or afraid of being disliked for "judging" their neighbors. Community leaders who attended training workshops were far more motivated and successful. Two engagement sessions for Firewise USA Resident Leaders were held in June with another planned.