

**Ashland City Council Wildfire Forum  
March 10, 2021  
Frequently Asked Questions**

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**COMMUNICATIONS**

**1. Does the City have a dedicated PIO staff member to provide information during an emergency?**

The Public Information Officer (PIO) position is a key function that is always assigned when the City activates its Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The type of emergency can change which staff position fills that role. Additional redundancy in EOC/PIO training is needed given the existing unfunded Communications Analyst position in the Administration Department budget. Police and Fire Department staff were essential to emergency firefighting and evacuation operations during the Alameda Fire and could not serve as PIO due to immediate threats to life safety. That’s just for Ashland. It’s unclear if the County has a dedicated PIO, but Phoenix, Talent and Fire District 5 do not.

**2. Does the City have an official low power AM or FM radio station to provide information?**

Yes, the City has the 1700 AM radio station, but it does not reach all areas of the city. Unfortunately, there were no staff able to update it (the 1700 AM station has to be physically updated inside the fire station via a thumb drive) during the initial stages of the fire event. Due to the overwhelming need for staff on scene and employee evacuations of their own families and homes. Technology upgrades allowing remote updates via smart phone is being explored to complement the existing system and will be evaluated and prioritized for funding in comparison with other high level needs.

**3. Why wasn't the Emergency Broadcast System used and what changes have been made to make sure this will happen in the future?**

The Emergency Broadcast System, which includes TV, radio, and “amber alert” messages were not activated for Ashland residents due to the brief period of time during which a small number Ashland homes inside the city limits were threatened. The initial mutual aid (Ashland Fire and Rescue, Jackson County Fire District #5, and Oregon Department of Forestry) response was adequate to protect Ashland homes and no further evacuations were needed. Ashland staff contacted Jackson County Emergency Management during the early phase of the fire, alerting them to the potential severity of the situation. The County’s after action review will conclude the steps the County took to notify areas outside the City of Ashland's boundary.

Emergency managers must balance the need to remove people from harm's way versus the potential dangers of needlessly putting cars on the road and potentially exposing others to fire due to the unpredictable nature of wildfire. If a future fire threatens any substantial portion of Ashland, all avenues of public notification will be used, including the Emergency Broadcast System, commonly called IPAWS by FEMA.

**4. Why did it take around 20 minutes from the call reporting the fire until the first Nixle alert went out? There was a long period of time for the neighborhood who knew about the fire and then were asked to evacuate.**

The first responders on scene arrived in six minutes and were responsible for attacking the fire and/or getting people out of immediate peril. Those arriving just after have the responsibility of launching the Nixle message based on information gathered by the first-in units. The first on scene crews were hit with heavy fire activity and had to immediately defend homes and property imminently threatened. Immediate evacuations were already being issued in person by Police and Fire personnel within minutes of arriving on scene and before the Nixle message. Fires directly impacting homes will necessitate an immediate evacuation either by the residents themselves, or via in-person contact from Police or Fire personnel. Nixle is an important tool but it does not and will not replace the need and priority of in-person contact for imminent danger to human and animal lives. In case of future fires, if you see fire nearby leave immediately and follow verbal directions from emergency responders.

**5. A suggestion to have short-term visitors can text-in to Nixle on arrival and text-out when they leave.**

This is feasible and would best be done in partnership with local businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, SOU, and other community partners.

## EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

**1. What plans are in place to help residents know what to do in case of an emergency?**

Please see our extensive [Emergency Preparedness Guide](#).

**2. What should residents do to improve safety for this fire season?**

During the staff presentation, the Fire Department listed the top five things residents can do to improve their fire safety this fire season. Do the following NOW before fire season:

- (1) Remove bark mulch from the first five feet of all structures (don't just rake it away from the structures, remove the mulch if you can);
- (2) Rake and sweep leaves and needles from gutters, decks and from the first five feet of the home;
- (3) Remove flammable vegetation (e.g. Mugo Pine, Arborvitae, Juniper, etc...) from the first 30 feet of your home starting at the foundation (visit [fireadaptedashland.org/flammableplants](http://fireadaptedashland.org/flammableplants) for a full list of flammable plants);
- (4) Know your individual evacuation plan by practicing multiple ways out of town and understanding the three evacuation levels: [Ready, Set, Go!](#), and
- (5) Sign up for Nixle, Ashland's emergency alert notification system, by visiting [ashland.or.us/nixle](http://ashland.or.us/nixle).

**3. What is the best way for someone to monitor an emergency like this (police scanner, emergency radio, etc.)?**

Sign up for [Nixle](#), the City emergency alert and communications system. Scanners can be purchased, but it's difficult to follow radio traffic and to know when you actually need to evacuate based on scanner information. Not all fires will require evacuation. Nixle notifications will be sent when evacuations are needed.

**4. Is the recommended type of air filter on the website somewhere?**

HEPA filters and MERV 13 filters (or higher, e.g. MERV 14) filter out unhealthy smoke particulates from the air. You can purchase mobile, standalone air purifiers for individual rooms in your home that have these filters; they can be found at local hardware stores, big box stores, or online. You can also purchase these filters for your central air system, but these can strain your system. Talk to an HVAC specialist before purchasing these filters for your system. [Smokewiseashland.org](http://Smokewiseashland.org) provides more detailed advice on what type of filters to use during times of smoke in your house.

**EVACUATION PLAN**

**1. Is there a plan to create a new city evacuation map?**

A study was underway before the Almeda Fire. When the results are issued, we will take into account the information provided to update the City's evacuation map and educate the public.

**2. Could there be areas within town identified to shelter in place like parking lots or non-flammable areas without evacuating town completely?**

This question would be specific to the fire's location, wind, and fire movement and there would be no way to predict at this time. Sheltering is a double-edged sword with potential to get people to a safer place, but they could still be exposed to choking smoke, falling embers, and overwhelming stress. Evacuating early and getting far from the fire is always the best choice, but that is not always possible in certain scenarios. Ashland does not have many places with large capacity lots far enough from potential fire zones compared to the number of potential evacuees. All options will be explored and identified.

**3. How and when will the evacuation study be communicated to public?**

The evacuation study will be presented to citizens when staff have reviewed the findings and created a simple and effective campaign. June is the dedicated month for evacuation awareness and a push will happen in that timeframe if not before. The City Council will have to have time to hear a report and recommendations from staff as well.

**4. Can the Ashland Airport contribute more to an emergency response?**

The Ashland Municipal Airport can and has been involved in numerous activities over the years associated with search and rescue along with support for firefighting activities. The City has entered in temporary agreements previously with emergency service agencies to use the Airport as a base of operations for response to emergency related events within the region and will continue to do so as needed and requested.

**FIRE FIGHTING**

**1. Would it be possible to have firefighting helicopters on standby during red flag events?**

There are helicopters on standby for fire events in Jackson County, However, not all air resources can be allocated to Jackson County when fires are burning throughout the region. There are very limited resources and the State tries to pre-position them based on conditions and existing fires. Also, often during high winds both helicopters and retardant planes cannot fly due to safety reasons. Decisions on the placement of air resources can be requested/recommended at the local level, but are made at the regional, State, and national level depending on the particular resource.

**2. There were six firefighting helicopters at the Ashland Airport on September 8 and only one took to the air an hour and a half after the fire started. Why did it take so long for that helicopter to launch and why weren't the other firefighting helicopters utilized?**

The Ashland Airport houses three helicopter services at times. On September 8, we were unaware of any firefighting air assets that were on standby at the airport. The helicopter that launched from the airport

about an hour and a half in was from ARS rescue systems and they were not used for direct firefighting efforts. This was more of a spotting aircraft and was available as an air rescue asset. The first helicopter was on scene within 30 minutes of the start of the fire and was from the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) office on Table Rock Road in Medford. The Greenway areas can get resources when available but if areas are actively burning within ODF fire protection zones, like the Obenchain Fire was during the Alameda Fire, resources will be split off to those fires (which were also threatening homes and communities).

**3. Would it be possible to have volunteer firefighters trained to help Ashland Fire & Rescue? This could include training some City employees who are not fire personnel as well.**

There is a national shortage of volunteers available for the fire service. Because of PPE, equipment training and other mandatory training requirements, it is difficult for people to have a full time job and be able to meet OSHA and NFPA firefighting requirements to be able to respond. However, Oregon through the Firefighter council is looking to augment the fire service with apprentice firefighters. There is currently a house bill at the State level to bring the apprentice position to life in Oregon. Using seasonal wildland firefighters in Ashland would need Council and Budget Committee approval. City staff from all Departments are assigned specific critical tasks in any emergency. Police, Public Works, and Electric Utility staff all have a role in emergency incidents, all coordinated and directed through the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

**4. What plans are there to save Lithia Park and the actual city of Ashland?**

Lithia Park's irrigated and developed areas are not at high risk of fire and would take lower priority than neighborhoods where people live. There is an extensive effort to reduce flammable vegetation that has been ongoing for decades, including the Lithia Park hillside that's undeveloped.

The [Fire Adapted Ashland](#) program, including the Firewise program, has been active since the early 2000's and has more resources than ever right now for citizens. It's important to know that the City will not remove flammable materials from private property; it is up to homeowners to do this work. Renters can contact their rental agency or landlord about options to remove flammable materials from the rental property.

**5. Has there been a recent survey of area water resources that might be used in such an emergency?**

Ashland's water system is well prepared for an emergency. Though any system can be run dry, our capacity and largely gravity fed system can handle a significant demand for firefighting. There is a water use agreement with the Forest Service to use water from Reeder Reservoir for fighting fires in the watershed and ODF can use any water source large enough to dip from in surrounding private lands, including the TID ditch where it's exposed and large enough to dip from during the TID season. Water resources logistics for regional air support is coordinated and handled by other agencies.

## **FIRE PREVENTION**

**1. What is the City doing for weed abatement on City properties?**

To date, the City has annually done weed abatement on 150 acres of City properties. The area where the fire started was mowed to stubble; the fire just spread too quickly across the short grass for crews to catch it, but that mowing likely saved many homes adjacent to the fire. In the past, many citizens and neighborhoods have requested that the City and Parks Commission leave certain areas uncut for privacy or other reasons. This year, due to the now clear threat of fire particularly in creek sides overgrown with invasive blackberries, the City and Parks are pursuing an additional 50 acres of weed abatement focused in identified hazard zones at North Mountain Park/River Walk area and the Dog Park neighborhoods before May 1. Work has already started in both areas.

**2. Does Ashland have a strong Firewise code for the 0 to 5 defensible space around homes? Are these enforceable?**

The City of Ashland has a Wildfire Safety Ordinance that is enforceable during new construction and significant remodels. The Wildfire Safety Ordinance (1) prohibits new installation of bark mulch within the first five feet of the home; (2) prohibits planting of flammable plants found on [Ashland's Prohibited Flammable Plants List](#) within 30 feet of the home; (3) prohibits installation and replacement of flammable fence material within the first five feet of any structure (learn more [here](#)); and (4) sets several [landscaping requirements within the first 30 feet around new construction](#) (including new homes, additions, and decks) over 200 square feet.

While all of those codes apply during new construction, the Prohibited Flammable Plants list applies City-wide to all existing and new homes. Link is above for more information.

**3. Does the City enforce camping and illegal fire laws along the Bear Creek Greenway and in the watershed?**

The City has aggressively enforced no camping laws in the watershed areas for decades. For the past two years, there has been a drone detection program that has been very successful in deterring illegal camping. After detected, Police contact the camp and notify people of local resources for the unhoused. Camps are removed if not vacated within 24 hours. Police respond to complaints of camping along the Greenway but the drone program has not been extended to that area. Enforcement activities in both the Greenway and the watershed rely on partnerships with other law enforcement agencies since those areas are outside of the city limits of Ashland.

**4. How can residents make their home fire safe without the need to constantly irrigate yards or take other costly measures?**

We provide a lot of suggestions on this topic on the City website. Visit [fireadaptedashland.org/prepareyourhome](http://fireadaptedashland.org/prepareyourhome) and click on the Firewise Plant List, Landscaping Guidelines, and Reduce Your Wildfire Risk icons to learn what you can do.

**5. What can someone do if their neighbor has dangerous plant on their property?**

We suggest talking to your neighbor if you are concerned. There is no code that requires removal of hazardous landscaping, except if the plant was installed after October 2018 and is on the City's [Prohibited Flammable Plants List](#).

**6. Is the City encouraging homeowners to retrofit their existing homes to be fire safe? What resources are available for the public to know what to do when making upgrades and routine maintenance?**

Yes, we are. We encourage all homeowners to prepare their homes and properties for wildfire. If you are looking for ways to retrofit your existing structures, check out our checklist from the City's [Wildfire Safety Campaign](#).

**7. Is infrared satellite imagery updated often enough to be a resource to monitor during fire season?**

Not for fire detection in real time. Our drone detection program uses an infrared camera and can spot small campfires. This only works early in the morning when there's a heat differential between the ground and a fire and can't constantly monitor areas throughout the day due to battery capacity and budget limitations.

**8. The map of the potential fire study area did not include the Bear Creek Greenway. Why was this left out and can it be included?**

The map shown was the strategic fire planning area, which is constrained to satellite data of vegetation categorized into fuel models that are then used to run fire behavior models that are essential in the process of planning fuels treatments and fire response. The planning tool was created for use on large and primarily forested landscapes across the U.S. It can't account for homes, yards, fences, and other human construction. That said, we can use the general idea to create fire management opportunities along Bear Creek and Ashland Creek. This is already happening with fuels reduction planned in areas where homes are at highest risk, and where fire suppression stands a better chance at success (road crossings, fields, orchards, etc.).

**9. What is the plan to reduce wildfire risk on properties outside the city limits? Also in regional areas like Ashland and Bear Creeks?**

Through the [Ashland Forest Resiliency](#) project and City sponsored grant programs since 2002, roughly 5,000 acres of private lands in and surrounding the city and watershed have had fuels reduction and controlled burning completed. However, there is no County requirement for properties outside the City to do annual cutting of grass and weeds. There are regional and state level proposals to create a weed abatement program for land in general county areas. Regional partnerships are moving ahead with efforts to clear blackberries along stream corridors from Central Point to Ashland. Private owners everywhere can help by removing blackberries on their own properties. The Fire Department has sent over 1,000 notices in the past six months to local property owners who have had overgrown vegetation in the past, including blackberries, to remind them of the City's weed ordinance.

**10. How do you find out your ID code for the property risk assessment? How do renter's get access to this information as well?**

At this time, the ID code for your individual property risk assessment is only available for owners to access. If you are a renter, talk to your landlord about accessing this data. If you did not receive a postcard with the access code for your property or lost your card, email [wildfire@ashland.or.us](mailto:wildfire@ashland.or.us) and they will provide you your individual access information.

**11. Do we have to live in the city limits to get an assessment?**

To get a wildfire risk assessment from Ashland Fire & Rescue, you must live within Ashland City limits. If you live outside of Ashland city limits, you can contact Fire District 5 or Oregon Department of Forestry to receive a wildfire risk assessment. Both entities offer these assessments at no cost.

**12. Will more education on the dangers of bark mulch be made available to residents as this seems to be the dominant mulch used throughout town?**

The City provides outreach to homeowners and contractors who install bark mulch through a variety of avenues, including website information, newspaper articles, one-on-one interaction, and Ashland's Wildfire Safety Campaign. We will keep pushing this education to homeowners and the companies that supply and install the mulch.

## REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

**1. Is the City working regionally on a fire evacuation plan?**

Yes, and it will be considered and coordinated with our neighboring communities as Ashland rolls out the information from its evacuation study.

**2. What is Ashland doing in partnership with other cities and the county in terms of reviewing the wildfire and making recommendation changes? What's anticipated timing for a) review/discussion and b) implementing new protocols?**

City staff has been working with Jackson County to provide information for their Emergency Operations after event review of the fire. The County has not yet completed or released their after-action review and

made recommendations. The City will participate as needed on both as well as continue to implement policy and prevention measures within city limits (see Council Action below). The timing depends on Jackson County, but the City will make that information available to the Council and residents when available.

## TRAFFIC

### **1. Can the City revisit the North Mountain & Nevada Street I-5 connection for either full or emergency use?**

The project as directed by the City Council will be re-evaluated in a Transportation System Plan Update (TSP). The update is scheduled for the 2021-2023 Budget Biennium and funding the TSP update is being requested as part of the budget process. If approved in the budget process then staff can begin working with the consultant team and the Transportation Commission on the update project.

### **2. Why was I-5 closed and traffic redirected through Ashland? How does the City plan to avoid this in the future?**

I-5 was closed at exit 14 early in the process as requested by the Oregon Department of Transportation and Emergency Services who were responding to fire activities along the I-5 corridor around exit 19 and Highway 99 near Valley View. The interstate needed to be closed in order to keep vehicular traffic from entering the fire zone. The closure soon thereafter was moved to exit 1 and then into California at Yreka. The vehicular traffic at the time of initial closure on the interstate between exit 1 and exit 14 needed an outlet and associated detour. Due to current evacuations and staffing resources being utilized to support these activities there was a time delay in getting appropriate staff to the intersection of Tolman Creek and Ashland Street to detour the interstate traffic back southbound to the freeway access for the onramp at milepost 11. That in combination with Highway 99 being closed caused temporary congestion on Ashland's main arterial roadways. ODOT's intent is to never close the interstate in a manner that re-routes traffic through downtown Ashland, but due to the speed of the event and the lack of resources at the time caused the congestion. City staff, ODOT, emergency services and other regional partners will continue to work together to improve evacuation efficiencies for all communities in the region.

### **3. What affect did the road diet have on the evacuation? How can it be better utilized to prevent traffic jams?**

The North Main Corridor actually facilitated the vehicular flow of emergency services for response to assist in Talent and Phoenix during the event through utilization of the median refuge lane which allowed them to bypass vehicles in the travel lanes. The corridor is still the same width as it was prior to the three lane conversion and that total width can be utilized to facilitate evacuations northbound. The same configuration exists in Phoenix and was used by ODOT to evacuate community members north utilizing the full width of the roadway, during the Alameda Fire. The City, ODOT, emergency services and regional partners will continue to work together to improve evacuation efficiencies for all communities in the region on all major highways and corridors.

### **4. Can the City work with ODOT to get more emergency access options to I-5?**

The City is currently working with ODOT for potential emergency egress access options to I-5. Approvals would be needed from the Federal Highway Administration as part of the process and ODOT is beginning these discussions. Any access would be for emergency egress only and controlled by ODOT.

## MISCELLANEOUS

### **1. What was the cause of this fire? How did it start? What was the result of the police investigation?**

Because this is an active fire investigation through Ashland Police Department, with support from both the local and state Fire Marshal's Office, the specific cause of the fire cannot be released at this time.

**2. With the great demand for preparedness, will the City restore the CERT coordinator position to full time?**

There is a large demand for preparedness in the city and as such several key positions have been identified as needing to be funded and filled. Addition funding resources are needed to expand current staffing levels in both the Fire and Police Departments. Regional partnerships, grant funding and other opportunities are actively being explored to provide additional capacity to City public safety departments with a focus on emergency management and preparedness.

**3. How is the Mayor and Council going to prioritize the items from the survey presented to ensure that necessary timely actions are taken before fire season?**

Council plans to consider all information gathered when creating future policy on wildfire safety and prevention. A study session was held on Monday, March 15 discussion Oregon's Residential Structural Specialty Code (ORSC) 327.4 relating to local adoption of wildfire hazard mitigation building codes. The evacuation study and details from Jackson County's Emergency Operations Center after action review will also be presented to Council when complete. Council will carefully consider the need for staffing and program implementation resources for wildfire adaptation and prevention measures that help keep Ashland residents safe alongside other critical public safety needs. Many actions to be taken are already a part of City program offerings to the community through the wildfire prevention work of Ashland Fire & Rescue ([www.fireadaptedashland.org](http://www.fireadaptedashland.org)).