

WSC Recommendations — Presentation to City Council May 21, 2019

The last year has been a lively one for our commission. We have a wide range of projects currently in the works towards increased wildfire safety. I'm happy to say our commission has grown into an extraordinarily well qualified body, including landscapers, building contractors, realtors, experienced wildfire consultants, FireWise leaders, as well as business and media professionals.

Together we're exploring some kind of Fire Safe Business License or certification for local building and landscape contractors. We're investigating how to best change the illegal camping culture that utilizes the woodlands surrounding our town during fire season. We're looking into the safety of the feeder electric lines surrounding our area beyond Ashland Electric's jurisdiction. We have one or two other small but important fire-related town ordinance change requests we'll be sharing with you in coming months.

On a typical year, this also might be the time for me to share details of our various accomplishments, such as the new "wildfire preparedness campaign" that we now expect to be an annual event. But I'm not going to talk about that tonight.

I'm here representing your Wildfire Safety Commission to applaud the high priority your council has recently given to emergency preparedness. Expanding on that theme, our report tonight is focused on the reality of Ashland's increasing risk of a large-scale fire and what would be an appropriate investment to avoid that future.

The Wildfire Safety Commission has given this much thought and developed recommendations I will share tonight. These recommendations outline how to reverse course and reduce Ashland's risk on multiple fronts. Several involve imminent City Council budget deliberations.

- 1) We commend the Budget Committee for affirming the importance of maintaining the current Fire Department staff size. One thing that caught our attention on this question was the staff Budget Committee presentation May 1, suggesting a Fire Department staff reduction could be offset by "Staffing Up" during Red Flag days. At the scale suggested in this proposal, this would lower department effectiveness and morale by requiring excessive overtime. A staff reduction would also impact the safety of our citizens year round, not just during fire season.
- 2) We do, however, urge reinstatement of the \$100,000 overtime fund cut that's under consideration. We believe it is critical that our Fire Department has the resources to respond with full effectiveness, given Ashland's increasing fire risk.
- 3) Illegal campers pose a significant fire threat. Our fire department has dealt with a number of wildfires started accidentally by campfires in our woodlands. One of these could easily spread into our town surprisingly quickly in the right wind conditions. Later tonight the fire department will be presenting a way to locate camps and campfires using infrared equipped drones that spot fires while protecting the privacy of Ashland residents. Our commission fully supports this plan.
- 4) Emergency preparedness is clearly one of your highest priorities. Towards that goal, our commission recommends your council fund the Sim Table purchase. A Sim Table uniquely offers staff detailed emergency planning information *before* an emergency. This is not just for Wildfires.

But. Considering how Ashland's risk of a major urban fire has actually increased in the last decade — due to the trifecta of changes in climate, the state of southern Oregon's forests, and Ashland's beautiful but dense landscaping, our recommendation is that reducing risk of widespread fire is important enough to justify having your council, city staff, and budget committee work together to find a solution.

Our commission believes Ashland's citizens, if made aware of the potential consequences of just maintaining the status quo, would be willing to support a well thought out plan to reduce our risk, much as our population voted to pay for improving Ashland's library services recently, and school bonds.

We offer our full support in doing our part to help educate our citizens.

So far tonight, I've been speaking mostly about current budget issues.

Once the current budget is resolved, however, we believe it's critical that we work together in new conversations, exploring ways to increase our town's resistance to wildfires and urban fires.

Ashland has thousands of homeowners that need guidance — and other help — making their properties safer. We need a bigger conversation in our town to sort out how to accomplish this in a relatively short period of time.

A measure pertinent to this discussion was just voted in by the City Council in Redding, due to the Carr Fire that destroyed 170 homes in West Redding last year. Earlier this month Redding's Council approved an \$8 million package to beef up their fire department.

They decided that in the long run, this investment will *save* their city money. A kind of insurance.

We're also learning about unexpected hidden costs in the aftermath of major urban fires. Before the Camp Fire, Paradise was a bit larger than Ashland. Their population, and so the town's tax base, is expected to take decades to recover. Last report has it at around a thousand. Only 6 percent of the toxic debris has been hauled away to date, 6 months later.

And — even deeper down than the toxic debris layer — it turns out big fires can compromise city water supply piping. In Paradise they're looking at up to 173 miles of now contaminated pipeline due to cancer-causing benzene and other volatile organic compounds. Their city water isn't safe to drink even after boiling. Paradise's estimated cleanup cost is 2 Billion.

It's impossible to project what a major urban fire would do to our town's financial health, but it seems safe to assume, even with outside disaster aid, it would be devastating.

Considering the number of lives at risk, as well as our financial exposure, we urge your council to get out ahead of this, instead.

We hope you'll agree that it just does not make any sense to wait until after we've experienced a significant urban fire before we make sure Ashland has what it needs to be properly prepared, and start lowering our risk in significant ways.

At our Wildfire Safety Commission's meeting last week, as we were reaching consensus on what I would be saying tonight, the group urged me to close by reminding us all that...

...as much as we might enjoy all the services and benefits Ashland's town government offers us, the essential, core purpose of town government is to keep its citizens safe.