

Wildfire Safety Commission Report to Ashland City Council

Scheduled for July 20, 2021

I. “**PACKET ONLY**” CONTENT:

Please check out the brief (300 words total) Wildfire Commissioners’ Bios that are included with this report, as I will *not* be sharing them during our report to Council on July 20, but I think you’ll find them pertinent in clarifying the remarkable expertise our Commission members bring to this work.

What follows is a condensed and bulleted version of our Commission’s annual report.

II. Intro:

- Our town’s vulnerability to wildfire has been apparent for years.
- But we weren’t overly concerned about Paradise *Camp Fire* level of devastation.
- We assumed Paradise’s geography and road access limitations made that area unique.
- The September 2020 Almeda Fire clarified we are dramatically more vulnerable than we thought.

III. Hats off to Council for the recent approval of the new wildfire-related building code changes for new construction and major remodels.

IV. Commission accomplishments since last report to Council

Successful Wildfire Information partnership with Rogue Valley Association of Realtors (RVAR)

- Home-sales centered wildfire adaptation program
- Potentially leverages home improvement budgets common during home sales and purchases
- Wildfire hardening information now folded into each home sale transaction
- Publicity materials and *Home Inspector* trainings paid for by RVAR Grant
- Local realty agents also received training by Katie Gibble of Ashland Fire & Rescue (AF&R)

2021 Spring Campaign

- *April- Home hardening; May- Landscaping, June- Evacuation, July- Smoke*
- Several dozen sandwich boards and other displays placed around town
- Monthly-themed *Spring Campaign* flyers stocked in sandwich board realty boxes.
- Flyers are going like hotcakes. Thousands already distributed for April/May/June
- April and May’s flyers address core Almeda Fire misunderstanding:
 - Δ **The myth:** *Almeda was unstoppable, so why bother working on home and landscape?*
 - Δ That myth essentially has it backwards: *Wind-driven urban fires like Almeda grow much larger, move faster, and are harder to stop than they would be if most residences were fully fire-adapted.*
- Commissioner Doug Kay’s Farmer’s Market table also disseminates Spring Campaign information

Strongest Spring Campaign yet, but Ashland is still far from being a fire-adapted city

- How often does a flyer motivate fully engaged work on one’s home?
- It is well documented that *face-to-face engagement* with property owners is more effective.

One partial solution: our Commission’s new Wildfire Risk Assessment Program (WRAP)

- Expands capacity to advise homeowners on each property in Ashland.
- Volunteer-based
- Goal: perform 3,000 face-to-face property risk assessments in Ashland
- Goal: Reduction of wildfire risk citywide by 25% in 3 years.

WRAP program accomplishments to date

- No cost to city beyond Fire Department staff time
- We anticipate Fire Department staff time invested in this program will save countless hours of staff-based home inspections.
- A skilled (volunteer) administrator is onboard to manage volunteer field workers
- We've resolved liability concerns
- AF&R, with Commission input, created a customized training curriculum
- Training is based on Oregon State University's *Citizen's Fire Academy*
- We've engaged a suite of (volunteer) expert instructors
- We've developed a competency certification process
- We've recruited 10 community volunteers to take the initial 2021 training
 - Δ Training ran weekly from May 17-June 21, 2021.
 - Δ Volunteers expected in the field by the anniversary of Almeda Fire.
- May serve as a model for other cities; We've had interest from other communities wanting to audit our course and eventually establish similar programs.

Evacuation information similarly spread door to door, in trial campaign, in June 2021:

- CERT volunteers initiated a limited door-to-door evacuation information campaign in our most vulnerable neighborhoods

Nuisance Ordinance expansion work

- Flammable vegetation significantly fueled the Almeda Fire.
- Ashland has abundant live and dead flammable vegetation particularly on vacant lots
- Currently we lack a legal enforcement mechanism.
- Our commission worked with Fire Department staff crafting a relatively simple amendment to Chapter 9.04 of the Ashland Municipal Code *Weed and Noxious Vegetation* to close this gap.
- This amendment should reach Council later this year.

Bark Mulch and Wood Fence Fire Retardant testing

- Bark mulch and wood fences also proved major contributors of Almeda fire spread.
- Our Commission's organizing a fire-department supervised burn test:
 - Δ Testing all major mulch offerings available in our valley
 - Δ Multi-year test of a wood fence fire retardants that are available locally

New emergency back-up power for 2 Ashland Water storage tanks

- We learned that 2 of 4 tanks feeding Ashland homes and hydrants use electric pumps
- Thanks to our Public Works Department for solving this problem
 - Δ Addresses possible loss of water pressure during a disastrous fire.

Oversight of Pacific Power maintenance addressing flammable vegetation

- Ongoing issue under high voltage lines near Ashland city limits.
- Pacific Power staff receptive to Wildfire Commission input until Covid hit.
- Pacific Power's primary solution is powering down some lines on select redflag days
- Ashland's Electrical Department staff is working with Pacific Power on issue
- We also plan to stay on this because turning power off is far from ideal: it also can interfere with water pumping and other fire-fighting efforts in outlying areas.

V. Looking to the future

The Problems:

- New building code does not apply to existing housing stock and landscaping.
- At current preparation rate, best data suggests we won't be ready for next major fire.
- Even if successfully motivated, many homeowners are unable to afford needed work.

How do we solve this?

- We recommend Council act on steps our Commission proposed at April Study Session.
 - △ This report will not repeat any of those specifics.
 - △ We urge you to make those steps a top priority during 2021-2022 strategic planning.
- The Alameda fire removed any doubt in our minds, and hopefully in yours, that the consequences of inaction would dwarf COVID's financial impacts or our town's current budget issues.

California's solution:

- Some CA counties have adopted strict code + regulations affecting existing homes..

Our Commission suggests: waiting until another major fire disaster does not make sense.

- There has to be a better way to bring our population on board with the needed changes.
- We urge Council to consider an increased collaboration with our commission to change this scenario.
- We recommend it be a priority on your agenda.
 - △ For a short term sprint, just for as long as it takes to transform Ashland into a wildfire adapted community.

What about homeowners that can't afford to do needed home and landscaping upgrades?

- We will need funding or loans to assist those that can't afford the work.
- Considering the budget challenges facing Council, we understand such funding is unlikely to come from the City.
- Our Commission has been in preliminary talks with local banking management
 - △ Looking at possible partnership with the City of Ashland
 - △ A bank would supply the funding for low interest wildfire hardening loans
 - △ Similar in some ways to the proposal you've recently discussed involving energy-related loans.
 - △ Goal is to give low income homeowners access to funds to do critical home hardening to make their home safer
 - △ Increases the safety of their neighbors as well.
 - △ Our Commission is in process of reaching out to City Staff on this question
 - △ If all goes well there may be a proposal for your consideration later in 2021.

VI. Questions?

Brief Wildfire-related biographies of current Wildfire Safety Commission members

July 2021

Kent Romney's worked as a Structural and Wildland firefighter, started about 20 years ago as a *National Inter-Agency Incident Manager* for the USDA forest service, and is currently on their *National Inter-Agency Community Mitigation Assistance Team*.

Dan Dawson directed an ecological reserve and research laboratory in the Sierra Nevada for The University of CA for 40 years, including the management of a complex forest plan involving fire ecology.

You may know Steve Asher's reputation as one of the top contractors in the Rogue Valley, but you probably don't know that he's been director of the *National Association of Home Builders* board, and president of the *Oregon Building Industry Association*, which has included working on fire-related building code.

Charisse Sydoriak worked for the *National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management* for 35 years as a fire monitor, fire management officer, chief of natural and cultural resources, and climate change adaptation specialist. She recently co-taught a 6-week OLLI course on *Living with Fire at Home and in the Landscape*.

Doug Kay has deep experience in home contracting nationally and internationally, both hands-on and at a management level, working with Property Owners, Planning Commissions, Utility Companies, Labor Boards, and County and Municipal Building Departments.

John Scarborough's career in software test engineering included several years in administration, but his favorite work was in leading software test teams, including teams that won Europe's major QA award, TESTA, in 2015 and 2016 He thoroughly enjoyed reviewing the formidably technical KLD Evacuation Study that informed our Commission's Spring Campaign.

Stephen Gagné's 4 diverse careers have less obvious connection to Wildfire Commission work. His most pertinent skills include writing, work as an educator, graphic arts and media creation, and serving on various boards.