

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION  
DRAFT MINUTES

Monday, April 5, 2021

Held Electronically

View on Channel 9 or Channels 180 and 181 (for Charter Communications customers)  
or live stream via [rvtv.sou.edu](http://rvtv.sou.edu) select RVTV Prime.

**Mayor Akins called the Study Session to order at 5:30 p.m.**

**Councilors' Graham, Hyatt, Moran, Seffinger, DuQuenne and Jensen were present.**

1. Update on Ordinance 3176

Police Chief Tighe O'Meara gave an update on Ordinance 3176. Staff is not recommending any action or reinstatement on this Ordinance. If Staff thinks this becomes an issue and needs to be reinstated it will come back to Council.

Council discussed probable cause. DuQuenne spoke that this Ordinance is not needed.

Council thanked Chief O'Meara.

2. Wildfire Safety Commission Recommendations Presentation

City Manager Pro-Tem Adam Hanks gave a brief Staff report and introduced Wildfire Division Chief Chris Chambers.

Chief Chambers gave a brief Staff report and introduced Wildfire Safety Commission Chair Stephen Gagne and Fire Adapted Communities Coordinator Katie Gible.

Gagne presented Council with the Wildfire Safety Commission Recommendations (*see attached*).

Items discussed were:

- Climate Change.
- 3-5 year plan.
- The need for a clear roadmap.
- Risk reduction.
- Challenges.
- FEMA grant.
- Interactions with homeowners in 3 stages.

Council discussed costs involved.

Council discussed a letter of request regarding expanding weed abatement. Once complete it will come to Council.

Council discussed the Road Diet and access to I5 during an emergency.

Council discussed emergency notification options.

Council discussed the Forest Resiliency Fee.

Council thanked Staff.

The Study Session was adjourned at 6:56 PM

Respectfully submitted by:

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City Recorder Melissa Huhtala

Attest:

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Mayor Akins

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## **INTRO for April 5, 2021 Council's WSC recommendations study session**

It is now clear climate change is accelerating faster than scientists expected, and we are seeing the impacts of climate change in much more frequent and intense wildfires. The Alameda Fire also brought home to all of us how vulnerable our town is to an urban wildfire that could take out thousands of homes on a windy red flag day. Our Commission has some good news and some challenging news to share.

The good news is three fold:

- If Ashland decides to tackle this risk, within a 3 to 5 year period we can massively reduce the risk of Ashland being truly devastated by wildfire.
- We have a clear roadmap. There's excellent, documented science on this. We know what needs to be done.
- Once we've completed that risk reduction, it would be relatively easy and affordable to maintain.

The challenging news is that it would involve a major, town-wide intensive sprint for about 3 to 5 years, rallying together in some ways reminiscent of the way our citizens and government handled the Covid threat.

We'd also have to get right on it, as those in the field who have been studying this believe such fires are likely to be upon us again in this decade, and certainly in our lifetimes, so if we want to avoid losing much of Ashland to fire we need to make this an immediate priority.

You may be wondering how I can so confidently say we can reduce our risk to this extent, considering the way the Alameda fire seemed essentially unstoppable until the wind calmed down. If you drive along the burn scars of the Alameda fire, you can see it hopscotched all over the place, spreading by airborne embers carried on the wind, crossing roads and other firebreaks to find fresh fuel. It is now well documented that up to 90% of the fire spread during large-scale events like the Alameda fire comes from wind-blown embers. If we eliminate our vulnerability to embers, the next Alameda level threat might take out dozens of closely spaced homes. Perhaps even hundreds. But not thousands.

There are several aspects to this challenge:

Our biggest vulnerability is our existing housing stock. The actual work itself — altering existing landscaping and removing ember fuels around our homes — isn't all that difficult once one accepts the challenge, but many Ashlanders will need financial help to get the work done.

You may have heard about the huge FEMA grant that AF&R has been working on for years. That's coming this spring and should go a long way to addressing the 1,100 homes here that are at greatest risk, but that still leaves all of Ashland's other homes and their landscaping undressed. How do we come up with something to help our low income residents and those on fixed incomes afford this work?

In the 4 page paper included in your packet, you'll see the Wildfire Safety Commission recommends a 5 year program involving a substantial outlay to assist homeowners, but given the current city budget situation, it may be more realistic to find a creative solution, such as some sort of low interest loan program for individual homeowners. Perhaps involving local banks in a kind of partnership?

Helping lower income homeowners is vital to lowering our town's fire vulnerability, but it is also outside our Commission's wheelhouse. We need Council's guidance and assistance to come up with a viable solution in these financially challenging times.

But even if we solve the funding, how do we get every homeowner on board, bringing them up to speed with the work that needs to be done and also accepting the need to change out landscaping and in some cases trees that people are understandably attached to? Our commission has been working with Ashland Fire & Rescue on that question since long before the Paradise fire, and we have excellent guidance for residents both on the Fire Department's web site and in our now annual Spring Campaign that I shared with Council in our last annual report. Our 2021 version of this Campaign launched 5 days ago; here for example is the sandwich board, stocked with informational flyers in the realty boxes, that's being sited at about 10 major businesses in town such as the Hardware and the Coop:

But people are busy. A campaign offered on the web and on flyers placed around town are a fine start, but realistically we know many people just walk on by. Flyers and web site information might produce sufficient change in about 50 years. Ashland will be consumed by fire long before that.

To be successful we'll need a series of 1 to 1 interactions with every homeowner in town, in 3 stages.

The first stage would involve going door to door to capture the attention of our busy residents, clarifying the importance of modifying their property to resist airborne embers. That's now a work in progress, hopefully working with CERT.

The second stage involves individual appointments with each homeowner to evaluate their property and advise how they can cost-effectively prioritize the needed work. This requires a

higher level of training and expertise. Towards this end our Wildfire Commission has been working to develop a training for a volunteer group, to conduct one-on-one assessments with landowners. The first training is scheduled to start next month.

The third stage involves confirming that the work was done, and followups in subsequent years.

Doing all this with Ashland's 8,841 residences is far too big a job for our current Fire Department staff. We hope to do almost all of this work with specially trained volunteers.

What's needed to support that cadre of trained volunteers brings us the the third aspect, a select few City Staff-level programs critical to increasing Ashland's resilience to fire. We understand that Ashland city finances are facing an especially difficult time, but we feel it's part of our responsibility as a commission to remind Council of the financial implications of losing roughly half our town to fire, if we don't engage in the sprint I've been describing here. We ask that Council help our commission and City staff figure out how we can make real progress on addressing this growing threat to our community given our resource limitations.

The Alameda Fire is a call to action, and a reminder that the fire risk we experience today is significantly greater than it used to be - and less than it will be in the future because of climate change. We must rally to the challenge by adapting our programs and focusing community energy accordingly. If we are able to complete the needed work before the next time fire comes to our community, we may be able to head off the destruction of much of our town. Fortunately, these efforts to reduce wildfire risk are adaptation elements in the Climate and Energy Action Plan, so this work moves implementation of that plan forward as well.