



Office of the City Manager

CONSENT CALENDAR
December 13, 2022

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Dee Williams-Ridley, City Manager

Submitted by: David Sprague, Interim Fire Chief

Subject: Companion Report: Measure FF Budget Recommendation – Expanded Fire Prevention Inspection Program

RECOMMENDATION

That the Berkeley City Council reaffirms its support for the work being conducted by the Fire Department (Department) and considers the Disaster and Fire Safety Commission's (DFSC) Report during the FY24 budget process if the DFSC chooses to resubmit an updated version at that time.

POLICY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

On November 21, 2022, the Public Safety Committee adopted the following action: M/S/C (Kesarwani/Wengraf) Positive recommendation to adopt the City Manager's recommendation as presented in the companion report. Vote: All Ayes.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

There is no fiscal impact to this recommendation.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

The Department continues to implement all the programs and projects funded by Measure FF which were reviewed and approved by the City Council and supported by the DFSC in the FY22 budget process. These included long-term projects associated with wildfire prevention and response, modernizing the city's Emergency Medical Services system, focusing on the training and development of an historically young and inexperienced workforce, and funding work to lay out a plan to modernize the communications center. These projects are critical to ensure the right resource is sent to the right call, the operational readiness of personnel and resources, ensure adequate staffing, improve retention, ensure that employees are trained and prepared to respond and mitigate all incidents to which they are called.

With regard to the DFSC's recommendation that the City expand defensible space inspection and mitigation efforts out to 100 feet from any structure, the Department already requires this of homeowners but has, and will continue to focus on, enforcement and mitigation of vegetation Zone 1 (0-30 ft) and the upcoming new State requirement to implement Zone 0 - Ember Resistant Zone that will start at the perimeter of a

structure and extend five feet. When Zone 0 is implemented, Zone 1 will be modified to 5-30'.

The Department's early efforts to create defensible space in the VHFSZ 2 and 3 have included direction to property owners that they initially concentrate on Zone 1 (0-30'). However, Department messaging to property owners has been consistent in explaining that owners are responsible for vegetation management out to 100' from any structure. There are several reasons why early Department efforts have been concentrated more heavily on Zone 1 (0-30'). Most significantly, addressing fuels in Zone 1 (0-30') will mitigate almost 70% of the landmass in the VHFSZ 2 and 3. Zone 2 (30-100') only accounts for approximately 27% of landmass in VHFSZ 2 and 3. When the public right-of-way, of which large portions are paved and generally not considered combustible, is removed from the equation, the landmass of Zone 2 (30-100') drops to less than 18% (17.3%) of the VHFSZ 2 and 3 landmass. Vegetation on the margins of most paved areas falls within the Zone 1 (0-30'). The science of defensible space, State statutes, and the direction of the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection place a greater emphasis on creation of defensible space closer to structures (Zone 0, 0-5' from structures), rather than farther from structures (Zone 2, 30-100').

Berkeley has prioritized the areas closest to structures and roadways for initial mitigation. Research on structure losses during wildfires shows that most structure ignitions occur within 30' of a structure based on combustibles in this area and ember cast. Vegetation adjacent to roadways potentially threatens evacuating residents and access for first responders. Property owners' efforts within these areas will provide the largest and quickest yield in terms of prevention of home ignition during a wildfire. Reducing fuels within 30' of structures, managing vegetation along the rights-of-way, and fire hardening structures will have more immediate and significant impacts than using limited available resources to enforce management of vegetation in Zone 2 (30-100').

BACKGROUND

At the April 27, 2022 special meeting of the DFSC, the Commission voted to recommend that City Council prioritize wildfire fuel reduction in the FY 23 and FY 24 Fire Department (Department) budget by expanding the fire Prevention Inspection Program and fully enforcing the existing Fire Code to clear vegetation build-up and overgrowth within the 100 feet of structures in Berkeley's Very High Fire Severity Zones (VHFSZs) (Fire Zones 2 and 3).

The Department is moving forward with creating a resilient, safe, connected, and prepared city through a variety of programs and projects, some of which are funded by Measure FF. The Department has provided the DFSC multiple reports and presentations through the FY22 and FY23 budget development seasons that included budget priorities and spending plans, budget process reporting timelines, fire code updates, mid-year and year-end expenditures. The Department acknowledges that the

DFSC has requested more detailed reporting, and the Department is working to understand what is possible with the new financial management system “ERMA”. The level of detail the DFSC is requesting is not something that has been traditionally provided to Commissions nor has it been easily available to Department administrators (requires significant manual staff work). Creating such a report would be mutually beneficial. The process to do so, and determining what level of detail can be exported, is currently being researched by Staff. At the April 27, 2022 special meeting of the DFSC, Department Staff presented the “Measure FF Budget Proposal” as shared with the City Council Budget Committee on April 22, 2022. The Department’s budget was approved as part of the City’s budget by the City Council on June 28, 2022.

The Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is well under way and scheduled to be completed in 2023. The CWPP is a comprehensive risk analysis that addresses local target hazards and includes a community-based action plan to mitigate threats, promote preparedness activities, and ensure resiliency. **The CWPP will serve as the foundation and roadmap for the City’s work to prevent wildfires and limit the spread when they ignite.** The Department has managed the procurement, configuration and implementation of a new mobile vegetation inspection and customer interaction platform. This software will substantively improve the way Department inspectors perform their work. The system will move the department from a paper to digital inspection platform. This will increase the accuracy and detail of information capture and improve data storage and analytics. Inspectors will have a fully customized and robust inspection tool that will allow them to create detailed reports, adding photos and using GPS mapping that will be emailed or mailed to the property owner following an inspection. These reports will include a prioritized list of actions that need to be taken to comply with the Fire Code and align with vegetation management and home hardening best practices. The reports are much more customer friendly than anything that has been used to date. This is anticipated to drive up the number of owners that move ahead with voluntary compliance. As of July 2022, this system is in the final stages of configuration and field testing.

Per California State regulation, the Department has expanded its traditional hazardous fire area vegetation inspection program to include all properties in fire zones 2 and 3; thus, increasing the number of inspections by 83% (+7,184). As the Department was unable to hire permanent staff, ten retired annuitants have spent the better part of the last year focused on completing these inspections, albeit with the legacy inspection system. Basic statistics as of the end of June 2022 are below.

Inspected	No Violations Found	Violations Found	Re-Inspection Completed	Re-Inspection No Violation Found	Re-Inspection w/Violations Found
8055	6015	2040	1595	1269	326

Our community has a robust network of Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT). While these groups have been indispensable in preparing neighbors for disaster, there is room for neighbors to be more engaged specific to wildfire. One of our retired annuitants has been focused on standing up an internal Department program to encourage and support the creation of FireWise groups. The purpose of becoming a FireWise group is to build community, learn and implement vegetation management and home hardening practices, and be better positioned to take advantage of grant funding available for these purposes. The first FireWise group was recently approved by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and there are a dozen more groups that have expressed interest. The process of becoming “recognized” as a Firewise neighborhood/zone is to organize, create a board, and develop a 3-year wildfire reduction plan.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

Vegetation management is an important part of wildfire preparedness. The Berkeley hills have various species that will likely need to be addressed collectively as a system, balancing the benefits of removal against the impacts to ecosystems. The CWPP will perform a comprehensive analysis of this and include recommendations to move forward.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

The goals suggested by the DFSC for FY23 and FY24 have already been approved by City Council and are already underway via the Department’s defensible space inspection program.

Wildfire program requirements are changing at the State and local level (statutes, Board of Forestry regulations, city of Berkeley Community Wildfire Protection Plan) and the Department’s WUI Division is not yet fully formed and staffed. The Department will identify and allocate funding necessary to complete this important work as foundational plans are completed, and programs continue to be built. While the DFSC is well versed in wildfire prevention and is well intentioned in their proposal to divert additional funding at this time, doing so before the WUI Division is fully staffed is premature and would siphon funds from other equally critical programs mentioned in brief at the beginning of this report.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS CONSIDERED

None.

CONTACT PERSON

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