

Preparation for Potential Wildfire Dangers in 2020

May 10, 2020

Mayor, Members of the City Council

This spring has been a most unusual one for all of us. The coronavirus has taken over all of our attention and energy and it seems that it will continue on into the summer. There is another potential disaster waiting to happen to Berkeley and the East Bay hills. All indicators point to a continued major drought, which means that an increasing amount of dried-out vegetative material could result in an immense fire load.

If the city is to avoid this potential disaster, it must act quickly. There may be a silver lining to all of this. Unemployment has reached an all-time high and people are looking for work. The City can use those people to work on reducing the fire load in Berkeley's fire zones

First, council should pass an ordinance that every property owner in the fire zones must clear a fire defensible space between their property and the one next to them. Include in the ordinance a provision that requires the property owner to pay for the work if it is not done.

Second the Council should hire a group of the unemployed to inspect all properties to be sure the defensible space is cleared.

Third the Council would hire the unemployed and homeless to do the work necessary to remove the fire danger from our community.

The following are the more detailed steps in the work that needs to be done:

1. Remove underbrush from both private and public properties, including right-of-ways, in all established fire zone areas. (Apply emergency authorizations if needed)

Employ all able bodied people, including the homeless, who are looking for work.

2. Check all roads in the fire zones. Make improvements where necessary to ensure a minimum clearance of 18' (11' for fire truck/ emergency vehicles + 7' for distressed , abandoned, and/or illegally parked vehicles) and 26' where oncoming traffic must be expected, on all roads within and leading to the above specified areas. Make sure there a ways to turn around on all dead-end streets in those areas.

Check all above regularly.

3. Set up a staffing plan for the Fire Department and supporting staff, including paramedics, police and other emergency personnel. There are many that do not live in Berkeley or close-by areas. It would be unrealistic to expect/ rely on staff coming from long distances to Berkeley. Start training additional support staff and volunteers now.

4. City needs to request from PG&E up-to-date power and gas line reports (the latter to prevent/minimize potential earthquake damage)

5. Establish realistic evacuation corridors / highways, map them, and distribute the maps. Identify collection areas and shelters, and stock them with emergency supplies.

The City is projecting a 25M budget short fall because of the coronavirus, so finding the funds to do the work is a challenge. The first place to start is to eliminate all the city commissions that are not mandated by voter passed initiatives. The savings from this could go a long way in paying for the work that needs to be done. Other sources of funding, such as dedicated bond financing, may need to be found as well.

If these steps are not taken and a wildfire destroys a large portion of the Berkeley community in the fire zones and/ or areas beyond, the costs to the City will be even higher than that of the coronavirus.

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