



TOWN OF FAIRFAX

STAFF REPORT

February 6, 2019

TO: Mayor and Town Council

FROM: Garrett Toy, Town Manager ^{GT}
Jason Weber, Ross Valley Fire Chief

SUBJECT: Approve \$46,000 in funding to expand the Defensible Space Inspection Program operated by the Ross Valley Fire Department

RECOMMENDATION

Approve \$46,000 in funding to expand the Defensible Space Inspection Program operated by the Ross Valley Fire Department .

BACKGROUND

The Ross Valley Fire Department (RVFD) is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) consisting of Fairfax, Ross, San Anselmo, and Sleepy Hollow Fire District. RVFD provides fire services to the Ross Valley. Councilmembers Lacques and Reed are the Town's board representatives to the JPA. Councilmember Lacques is the current board president.

In light of the devastating wildfires in Northern California, Councilmembers Lacques and Reed requested RVFD to develop a program to expand its efforts to address wildland fire protection and vegetation management in the Ross Valley. While RVFD has taken many steps over the years to prepare for wildfires, we acknowledge there is a need to do more.

The current defensible space inspection program consists of engine companies inspecting zones that are assigned by the shift Battalion Chiefs. The Department has utilized a contracted inspector working one day per week during fire season for inspections, follow ups, and documentation. During these inspections, hazards are identified, and residents are directed to take specific actions that will increase the likelihood that their homes and neighborhoods would be defensible and thus survive a wildfire. There are challenges with the program which include maintaining consistency in inspections and a large number of follow up issues to be tracked. Public information and re-inspections are difficult for shift personnel to track and complete. The lien process as an enforcement mechanism is time consuming. An enhancement to the current inspection program, as discussed below, would better prepare the community in case of wildfire.

DISCUSSION

The RVFD proposal is designed to increase the capacity for educational and preparedness-type inspections. Inspections are formally documented based on Marin County Fire Code and State Defensible Space PRC 4291. There are several components to this program, including community outreach and advance notification. The community would be initially contacted through a pre-season

notification mailer and additional canvassing would occur through posters and via social media outlets to residents as well as being included in any newsletters or other publications generated by the member agencies.

Potential community and neighborhood meetings will be held to explain community preparedness actions which include evacuation routes, Defensible Space Inspection Program (Program) and requirements including fire inspection checklist, hardening structures, and ALERT MARIN – emergency notification system. Follow-up inspections will be documented, tracked and prioritized based on the greatest amount of violations for any single resident, the availability of inspectors, and requests from residents for follow-up inspection or information/clarification. The Program will utilize a dedicated email and phone voicemail system for tracking and communication. This funding would allow the Ross Valley Fire Department to hire a Lead Supervisor Inspector, 2-4 defensible space inspectors, and associated equipment/vehicle costs.

This proposal and associated costs would be shared between the three towns (Ross, San Anselmo and Fairfax). Sleepy Hollow, for now, funds their own program. Priority areas have been identified based on the need for defensible space, the current level of public engagement, areas where evacuation routes are challenging due to vegetation overgrowth, and the patterns of how vehicle parking impedes the access on narrow roads that will provide challenges to emergency response in combination with public egress. The 2016 Marin County Community Wildfire Preparedness Plan (CWPP) fire modeling identifies these areas as consistent with rankings for Areas of Concern, and areas ranked as being able to support Very High Flame Length, Rate of Spread combined with high population density (go to: <http://www.firesafemarin.org/cwpp>).

The goal is to begin inspections for priority areas this May. We anticipate that Fairfax will have two targeted neighborhoods in this initial effort. The program was unanimously approved by the RVFD Board. The cost to implement this program is between \$78,000-\$100,000 annually for all three towns.

The estimated cost to the Town of Fairfax is \$46,000 based on the potentially higher \$100,000 budget. Program costs were allocated based on the percentage of the total number of parcels to be inspected in the Ross Valley. Fairfax has approximately 46% (1,838) of the total parcels (3,936) to be inspected. The possibility exists that RVFD will be able to conduct more inspections than estimated, but it depends on a variety of factors (e.g., owner cooperation). Both Ross (\$6,000) and San Anselmo (\$48,000) have committed to funding their share of this expanded program.

FISCAL IMPACT

While RVFD will begin inspections in the current fiscal year (FY18-19), the Town will not be billed for its contribution until next fiscal year (FY19-20). However, RVFD wanted a funding commitment from its members before incurring the time and effort to create the expanded program. The \$46,000 will be included in the FY19-20 Town budget for RVFD.

In the current FY18-19, the Town budgeted \$75,000 for fire inspection/prevention services and \$20,000 for Chipper Days. A majority of these funds have been expended for increased vegetation management activities in Town including the expanded Chipper Day program.