



SAN RAFAEL CITY COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

Department: Fire Department

Prepared by: Christopher Gray, Fire Chief

City Manager Approval: _____

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TOPIC: WILDFIRE PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS

SUBJECT: UPDATE REGARDING ONGOING CITY EFFORTS TO PREVENT AND PREPARE FOR WILDFIRES

RECOMMENDATION: Accept informational report and provide direction on follow up actions.

DISCUSSION: Staff will be providing a verbal report on City efforts regarding wildfires. This is a topic that involves most City departments with a particular focus on the Fire Department, Police Department, Public Works, Community Development, and Community Services. The Fire Department and Police Department will take the lead on the staff presentation, and the other departments will be available should there be questions that relate to their activities. The following is a brief overview highlighting some of the issues and activities regarding the City's efforts to prevent and prepare for wildfires.

This year, San Rafael, similar to many parts of the Western United States, is in the midst of an unusually long and high-risk fire season as a result of several recent years of drought, high levels of extremely dry vegetation, and elevated summer temperatures. The high fire hazard has created an elevated concern of fire risk in the City, including its public parks and open spaces. In response to increased public inquiry and concern regarding the fire risk in City open spaces, the City has prepared the following report with an update on current practices with regard to vegetation management, community engagement and preparedness measures, enforcement of laws in open space areas, and the abatement of hazardous materials in and on City open space and other public properties.

In the fall of 2017, the Counties of Sonoma, Napa, and Mendocino experienced unprecedented, fast-moving, and catastrophic wildfires which resulted in the tragic loss of dozens of lives and thousands of structures in both rural and urban areas. The densely vegetated rolling hills that provide San Rafael with much of its natural beauty and character also create the potential for similar large and fast-moving wildfires capable of devastating the

FOR CITY CLERK ONLY

Council Meeting: 08-20-2018

Disposition:

environment and the lives, homes, and livelihoods of thousands of people in San Rafael and neighboring jurisdictions. San Rafael has already seen one wildfire this summer on San Rafael Hill, which burned 11.6 acres of open space on June 9 and which is believed to have originated at an illegal encampment in that area.

Typically, fire season spans from May to December each year. However, due to current climate conditions the Fire Chief has found that the entire year now constitutes a significant local wildland fire risk.

Throughout the year, the City takes multiple measures to protect and prevent wildfires in City parks and open spaces. Highlights of these measures include:

- Employing two Police Department Rangers to regularly patrol open space areas;
- Fully staffing six fire engines and two medic units, for a total of 22 firefighters plus a battalion chief, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year;
- A comprehensive Vegetation Management Program, including two dedicated Vegetation Management Inspectors;
- Active community engagement and education leading to increased community readiness overall and including two new Fire Wise Community certified neighborhoods in 2018 (Dominican/Black Canyon and Mont Marin);
- Training and exercises for city staff on preparedness and response in the event of a San Rafael disaster, led by a full-time Emergency Manager;
- An ongoing social media presence with reminders of risks, current impacts and mitigation measures for fire (and other hazards);
- An active Community Emergency Response Training (CERT) program;
- Collaboratively working with PG&E, SMART and other agencies to clear vegetation hazards in high-risk ignition areas;
- Improving public awareness of and registration to emergency alert systems to ensure we can communicate with the public in an emergency; and
- Ongoing planning and coordination with community partners and service providers to ensure they are disaster ready to coordinate services during an emergency, including evacuation planning.

In July 2018, the City's vegetation management web-pages were updated with more information about how residents can report open space fire risks, including illegal campsite locations, via smartphones, and with more statistics about enforcement efforts over the last year. For more information, see: <https://www.cityofsanrafael.org/vegetation-management/>

The City's outreach staff continues to work to engage those who are living in illegal campsites to get on the path toward housing. Since the County-wide Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) and Coordinated Entry have been in place, 71 chronically homeless individuals have been housed. This summer, the City also created a Homeless By-Name list to better track homeless individuals and target appropriate measures to facilitate housing solutions.

Camping is prohibited by City code in the City's parks and open space areas (SRMC 8.10.090 and 19.10.60). Similarly, the presence of "combustible or flammable waste or rubbish of any type" in City open space is a violation of California Fire Code section 304.1. Smoking is also prohibited in open space areas. (SRMC 9.04.050 and 19.10.60). The City regularly patrols the open space areas and responds to complaints of debris and other hazardous materials, including complaints of encampments.

State law and the City charter and code give the City the power to declare and abate public nuisances, and to use summary abatement procedures when necessary to eliminate an imminent threat to the health and safety of the public. The Fire Chief has determined the presence of combustible material in City parks and open space to be a threat to public health and safety and thus has ordered any observed combustible material be removed and disposed of immediately. The City defines combustible material as sources of ignition or highly combustible materials or items that could corrode or burn or be used as a heat source for an encampment. Such items may include, but are not limited to, containers of gasoline, propane or other combustible materials; matches and lighters; other materials intended for burning such as candles or incense; batteries and jumper cables; other electrical equipment; and non-city designated cooking facilities and similar equipment.

Where encampment materials are present and observed in City open space that are deemed not to pose an imminent threat to the public health and safety, authorized City staff or their agents may post the site with a notice directing removal of all property and materials from the site, and advising that in not less than seventy-two (72) hours, any property and materials remaining on the site will be removed by the City to be stored and/or disposed.

The Department of Public Works is responsible for maintenance of City open space and coordinates with the Fire Department on fire prevention-related activities. Outside of open space areas, fire prevention efforts are led by the Fire Department's robust Vegetation Management Program. The City has adopted an ordinance with vegetation management standards (SRMC 8.10.090) for parcels located in designated Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) areas. This ordinance, which requires the creation of defensible space around homes that are located in high fire hazard areas, is rigorously enforced by Vegetation Management Inspectors; in the first six months of 2018, inspectors conducted approximately 850 residential fire hazard assessment inspections. These inspectors also manage a residential chipper program, free for homeowners, through which more than 500 tons of flammable juniper and bamboo have been removed so far in 2018.

In 2018 to date, Vegetation Management Inspectors have met with 15 Homeowners' Association (HOA) and neighborhood boards to educate residents about managing wildfire risk and identify areas needing vegetation clearance. The Fire Department also organized a three-hour WUI Symposium, held on May 3 and attended by more than 100 residents, which included presentations by elected officials and experts on how to prepare for wildfire. A second Wildfire Seminar is scheduled for August 26 at Dominican University.

City departments are collaborating on a package of potential actions that could be taken to increase San Rafael's readiness and prevention of wildfire. Staff intends to receive direction from the City Council at this presentation and return with a package of recommended actions for City Council consideration.

For example, City staff has identified that changes to the Municipal Code would allow for an even more robust fire prevention and preparation effort. Possible revisions include: updating the WUI ordinance and expanding WUI boundaries to cover the entire city; increasing enforcement fines per SRMC 1.42.010 and penalties for negligent actions that start a fire, particularly on Red Flag Warning days; and expanding the City's authority to engage in and assess fees for vacant property abatement including revenue-generating options for additional private and public vegetation management efforts. Additional prevention and preparedness steps could include public outreach about evacuation routes, including new signage, and introduction of new fire-detection technologies. Should the Council direct, these recommended actions, and others, will be formalized and brought back from City Council consideration.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Accept informational report and provide direction on follow up actions.