

WUI Working Group Meeting

Sept 11, 2019

Attendees: Commissioner Peggy Maceo, Zoila Vega, Commissioner Linda Guerrero, Michael from the Tree Foundation, Nate Casebeer, AFD GIS Analyst Justice Jones, AFD Division Manager, Kimra Hamilton, AFD Administrative Assistant, Mark Baker, AFD Wildland Urban Interface Coordinator, Commissioner Wendy Gordon, Commissioner Kevin Ramberg, Chris Herrington, Commissioner Pam Thompson, Ryan Fleming

Public: We need to keep things consistent: does the WUI Code address structures within 50 feet or 150 feet from wildlands?

We need to define wildlands.

What about lands that have different zoning?

Staff response: We do not distinguish ownership of property for fire risk analysis.

Staff: 150 feet is the area most effective for mitigation treatment.

Public: Vegetation treatment is separate from WUI Code. This is very complicated. City Council won't understand it.

Public: I see a lot of important unintended consequences. Regarding the removal of leave litter and other small ground debris:

Globally we are seeing dramatic declines in the number of invertebrates. Invertebrates are a vital part of the health of our ecosystem, including tree health. They contribute to healthy soil communities, feed insect-eating birds and other insectivores, and prey upon pest insects. Dead invertebrates need wood, ground debris, and leaf litter are necessary for healthy microbial soil communities, provide habitat for many

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invertebrates, help control soil erosion, help build soil, contribute to

higher ground moisture and more carbon sequestration.

If we eliminate these conditions we lose the ecological services provided by the insects (57 billion per year in the U.S.), the healthy soils which

contribute to tree health and resilience, and food for insectivorous birds,

and other insectivores, which help control pest insects. Trees will be less

resilient, tree mortality will increase, and we will have a greater risk of

fire and worsen the heat island problem. ~~healthy soil and leaves to live.~~

~~We need to do things to improve the health of our soil and the trees.~~

~~We need to encourage beetles. If you take out the microorganisms in~~

~~soils, we will have more dead trees and higher risk of fire.~~ We need to

~~leave leaf litter and downed wood whenever possible on the ground.~~

Public: I agree. To protect our environment we need to slow down new development.

Staff response: Resource management is important to us. The Pinnacle Fire in Oak Hill mineralized the soil in that area. We want to keep that from happening.

Public: The map does not make sense. It is not labeled. Risk maps should not have undeveloped land. What is undeveloped land: Can it burn? Is it good or bad? I am confused with the mish mash of terminology. The map is not explicate.

Observation: WUI Code does not just apply to the remodel, it applies to the whole house once the remodel starts.

Staff response: Point taken. We have been trying to align with existing processing. We will do education before and after adoption.

Public: Public meetings are necessary.

Public: I need help reading the table presented. I need an example of hardening of the home. When is it not necessary? Which one doesn't require defensible space?

Public: How can we require compliance with the WUI code?

Staff response: Fire resistant construction will be required within 50 feet of the WUI. We need to protect structures from embers.

Public: Oaks between the WUI and development should not be cut down to provide access.

Staff response: We have no rules right now. We need rules to protect people, structures and things we value, like our oak trees. Insurance companies are discontinuing fire policies from developments, such as Berkley Hills, because of their high fire risk.

Public: What is the process to review the risk?

Public: It would take a leap of faith for me to approve this. I need to protect the trees. I would only agree on condition that the rules are done. The public needs to participate in the details, and it needs to happen in a process, like Fire Wise. People will make decisions based on whether it is cheaper to prune trees or just take them out. Austin Fire Department needs to assess the sites. We cannot have voluntary compliance.

Staff: Arborist will be needed. Texas Forest Service offered a class in the spring, and we have twice as many certified arborists in the city.

Concern: Is it mandatory that arborists are certified in Austin?

Staff response: No.

Concern: Will neighborhoods be in charge? What if they decide to cut down all the trees?

Staff response: We may need to create some shaded fuel breaks.

Public: Is the tree ordinance to protect trees included in the defensible space definition?

Public: Leaf litter is needed on the ground to provide moisture and better soil. I need to see this reflected in the code.

Public: We need to consider young trees. Residents should be required to harden their homes before they even think about defensible space and destroy habitat.

Public: We need to define terms, such as hazard, fuel reduction treatment, defensible space, shaded fuel breaks, and be consistent with using them. We need all the information in one place instead of having to look things up to find definitions, tables, and information. We need best management practices for WUI Code. Ladder fuels need to be addressed.

Public: Is there a threshold that AFD could recognize to encourage insurance companies to keep fire insurance premiums in high risk areas? Staff response: If we are in compliance with WUI Code, we can ask insurance companies. Some will consider fire resistant materials, but some will not. There is no blanket statement. It won't lower the rates.

Public: We need to do public outreach on the WUI Code. Fire Danger is not going away. We should compare with other areas that have adopted WUI code.

Staff: Leon Valley, Texas is a Fire Wise community. Westlake has voluntarily changed vegetation levels. We want to address the structure hardening issue.

Public: I need a copy of the 100 ft Warbler Habitat Document.

Other public concerns:

Affordable housing and equity; we are pricing everyone out of Austin, and the WUI Code will make it more expensive. Plus, price for permits will go up; taxes are going up.

Maps are confusing.

What are the unintended consequences?

Remodeling triggers and thresholds need to be identified.

Price for permits will go up; taxes are going up.

People need clear instructions on vegetation management. We need to protect the preserves.

We need to decide how much money will be needed to support WUI Code enforcement, fines, and reviews.

Who will WUI Code apply to?

How much public education have you had?

Environmental integrity needs to be added. We need to educate the public so they do not think they just need to cut down all the trees.

We could make a Fire Risk ATX so the public can type in their address and see their fire danger.

Grants and incentives could help homeowners with the expense.

Investment in our environment up front will yield a much greater return than investment later; very often we cannot undo the damage we have done-no matter how much we spend.

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We need a Best Management Practices worksheet with a map on one side to help educate the public on what they need to do. Best

Management Practices include not overly limbing up young trees.

The WUI Code focuses on hardening structures.

Where does the vegetation waste go?

AFD needs to present scientific studies, documents, and other information in the presentation. What studies and resources were and are being used to create the plan?

How will the WUI Code be implemented? Will there be steps in a process?

Provide more details about the content and timeline for rule adoption necessary to implement code.

Provide more definitions/explanations of more complex topics (e.g., ladder fuel, defensible space) such that the code is easier for the public to understand.

Additional note:

Eucalyptus trees are being planted in Austin and other areas of Texas. Eucalyptus serves no useful purpose in our ecosystem and are exceptional, explosively flammable. Although they are very pretty they are much too dangerous to be allowed. They are a tremendous fire risk (see deadly fire in Portugal, many people burned to death in their cars, also Australia where they are native). Eucalyptus are also invasive and readily re-sprout from fire.

People with eucalyptus in their yards need to be given a 2-3 year time limit to remove them and we can give them a new tree. Eucalyptus in natural areas (I've seen one in a creek) need to be removed immediately. (Yes, I know they are really pretty.)

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