



## MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Joel G. Baker, Fire Chief

DATE: June 2, 2021

SUBJECT: Update on Wildland Urban Interface Code

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This memorandum serves as an update about the 2021 Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Code and the decision to continue to work through challenges with the practical application of the 2015 WUI Code that was adopted in January 2021. AFD plans to implement the 2021 WUI Code changes next year.

### The Decision to Delay Implementation of 2021 WUI Code Changes

The Fire Marshal's Office of the Austin Fire Department (AFD) has reviewed the potential impact of moving forward with incorporating the 2021 WUI Code changes after having just implemented the 2015 WUI Code, which was hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. There are 99 potential code adjustments, which will require significant-cross departmental effort to review for potential changes to other departmental procedures. Most of the code adjustments clarified issues identified during initial implementation and clean-up issues that were not included in the adoption of the 2015 WUI Code. By delaying implementation of the 2021 WUI Code to next year, this will allow developers more time to adjust to the recently adopted 2015 WUI Code standards and will give AFD an additional year to observe and track the practical applications of the WUI code that have not been implemented before in a city the size of Austin.

### Recommended Land Development Code Changes

The land development code (LDC) revisions below were originally listed as areas of concern in the Austin Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire (CPAW) report provided by Headwater Economics in 2016; however, the LDC changes were never adopted. The following section describes how AFD is incorporating to the extent possible the intent of the LDC change.

*1 - Staff amendment recommended by Planning Commission as a substantive revision added wildfire risk area in project assessments.*

One of the key features of adopting a WUI code is that it brings a fire reviewer to the table at the subdivision and residential site plan phase. With the current WUI Code, there is some basic authority and recognition of wildfire risk by stakeholders. The creation of vicinity plans as a practical tool for better residential development is in the current code. It will be further codified in the future LDC as it will allow for the proper separation distance from the wildland to be a major factor in site layout. The

neighborhood is then constructed with distance from the WUI area as a driving force in home location on the lot. These WUI concepts can be applied to commercial site plan review as well. This is of particular concern in multi-family housing with regard to potential exposure to wildfire and the need for evacuation.

*2 - Staff amendment recommended by Planning Commission as a substantive revision added an item to allow Hill Country Roadway corridor natural areas management for wildfire safety.*

The Hill Country Roadway corridor language was an attempt to begin consideration of life safety improvements in this and other “do not touch areas”. Though some areas have made progress, and the City has developed methods to gain better compliance, the Hill Country Roadway corridor is not one of those areas and remains in need of future improvements.

*3 - Wildfire risk provision added to commercial landscape requirements allows alternative designs for defensible space.*

The AFD Wildfire Division, in partnership with the Development Services Department environmental reviewers, have worked out landscaping criteria for commercial properties. Essentially fulfilling this request as listed in the CPAW report from 2016.

*4 - Staff amendment recommended by Planning Commission as subject to further review will balance with proposed WUI code requirement for ignition resistant fence material within 10 feet of a structure if in a wildfire risk area. A reasonable option here would be to state “or required by the WUI code”.*

A fencing standard has been adopted and currently applied in the WUI areas. This is a feature that will continue with the adoption of the 2021 WUI Code next year, with consideration for additional enhancements in the future LDC.

*5 - Staff amendment recommended by Planning Commission as a substantive revision added mitigation of wildfire risk area in General Planning Requirements Chapter purpose section.*

Adoption of the WUI Code, and involvement in site plan review and approval, essentially captures the intent of this section. Adding the above listed amendment in future LDC adoption guarantees the WUI Code will remain at the table. In addition, changes to the 2021 WUI code can better define the authority of the Fire Chief in the WUI areas as well as tie the WUI code with the Fire Code to improve overall authority.

*6 - Wildfire hazards added to list of considerations for ROW alignment*

AFD remains in communication with the Austin Transportation Department and the Development Services Department transportation group to ensure that during development Wildfire remains a considerations in land development via site plan review with Right of Way considerations.

### *7 - Changed reference to Wildfire risk map instead of NFPA standard*

This item refers to the section of the LDC where street length and single lane access are a concern for evacuation. AFD has been successful in applying this as a life safety standard with the use of the Wildfire Division's risk map as a more reliable and accurate tool to require a second means of egress from residential developments in High Risk area as a life safety exception. This will still be a welcome addition to the LDC to bolster AFD's authority and provide greater consistency.

### *8 - Definitions added for wildland-urban interface area.*

Though the terms "Fire Protection Plan" and "Wildfire Urban Interface" are not currently in the LDC, AFD feels that the definitions are becoming widely known with the adoption of the WUI code and the plans for future enhancements of the WUI code. The more that the WUI Code is applied, the more often these terms are considered even without being included in the LDC definitions. AFD remains in favor of adding these terms to future versions of the LDC, but the need is less pressing than before.

## Next Steps

AFD will continue to apply the 2015 WUI Code, look for areas of improvement, and engage locally as well as with other municipalities that have adopted the code. Potential improvements have been identified and will be applied in the adoption of the 2021 WUI Code next year. Outside the code, paths forward to improve wildfire resilience have been found and implemented whenever possible. Other areas of improvement moving forward should include allowing land management in natural areas and critical environmental features as current rules, in some cases, limit what private property owners can do to mitigate wildfire hazards. A balance is sought between preservation and management that will allow the protection of natural areas and also provide protection and peace of mind to adjacent property owners and residents. Voluntary WUI code compliance will also be a key component in the future as the standards are improved, standardized and communicated with community members.

Should you have any questions, please contact me, Chief of Staff Rob Vires or Fire Marshal Tom Vocke.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager  
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