

0.0 BRIEFING PAPER

Wildfire is everybody's fight – not just the first-responders at the local fire station but everyone who lives in all parts of Travis County. Our woodlands, riparian areas, suburban greenbelts, and tree-shaded pathways make this part of central Texas the gem that attracts new citizens and visitors from over the world.

You live in a downtown Austin high-rise: you have a stake in fighting wildfire if you enjoy our area parks. You live next to a suburban greenbelt: you have a stake in fighting wildfire to protect your home and the landscape. You live on rural acreage in Travis County: you have a stake in fighting wildfire to preserve our Texas heritage.

No citizen gets a pass on fighting wildfire, no matter where they live in Travis County.

As our community continues to expand into once-rural parts of the county more of our residents settle into what fire-prevention professionals call the Wildland Urban Interface, the WUI. As the name implies, it's where human development – houses, businesses – share a back fence with land that once was farm or rangeland. Austin is expected to double its population in the next 30 years and much of that growth will be in this interface.

But the WUI is more than just a place; it's a set of conditions: climate (ours is getting drier), vegetation, topography, and proximity of structures. During the 2011 Labor Day weekend, those wildland urban interface conditions struck residents of Travis and Bastrop Counties with devastating force. That weekend some 7,000 acres burned in Travis County, destroying 57 homes. Our neighbors in Bastrop County suffered the largest per-capita loss in the nation's history as flames consumed 34,000 acres and 1,700 homes.

Before those fires of 2011 receded in memory, key Austin and Travis County officials formed the Joint Wildfire Task Force (JWTF). Its goal was to make sure all communities in the region became fire adapted. It's not *if* another major wildfire will hit us – but *when* it will hit us.

The task force's Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is the next major step along that road to developing a cohesive strategy for dealing with three key wildland fire issues: restoring and maintaining landscapes, creating fire-adapted communities, and risk-based management response to wildfires. This CWPP is the primary tool for reaching those goals.

The CWPP concept had its beginnings with the passage of the federal Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA). Passed in response to major western fires in 2002, HFRA encourages local communities such as ours to develop strategies for mitigating the effects of wildfire through a plan such as the CWPP. The federal legislation required that CWPPs be collaborative, set priorities for fuel reductions, and recommend how residents can take personal responsibility – what citizens can do to keep their homes and businesses safe from wildfire.

The Austin/Travis County CWPP is a regional planning document developed with guidelines from the Texas A&M Forest Service. It's addressed primarily for professionals: firefighters, land managers, and land developers. But it also recognizes that for the county to become truly fire adapted such information must get into the hands of local leaders and residents. An important part of this CWPP is a Toolkit in Appendix E to be used to develop a local-level CWPP. It's information for municipal leaders in the county's smaller communities and HOA directors in developments near or within the WUI.

First step in developing this CWPP was to sound out stakeholders in a series of meetings across the county. There were three types of stakeholders: community, expert, and wildfire prevention. The latter two were groups of professionals directly involved in either managing resources that might be affected by wildfire – expert stakeholders – or those who work to mitigate the effects of wildfire – wildfire prevention stakeholders.

Community stakeholders were general citizens who had values or concerns they considered most threatened by wildfire. These community values generally fell into three categories: natural, social, and cultural.

Natural community values included ecological ones – wildlife habitat, water, parks, and preserves. Social values covered our schools, libraries, hospitals, and other critical infrastructure. Cultural community values encompassed archeological sites; landmarks; churches, and, in true Texas fashion, our barbeque eateries.

One particularly telling perception, or misperception, came from the community stakeholder meetings: The Other Side of the Fence. The other side of the fence, your neighbors, has the greatest potential for wildfire. This was a special concern of residents; especially those who live in the wildland urban interface and might be near a greenbelt or a preserve of some kind.

Looking to the other side of the fence is often looking past the best opportunity to protect your own property. Several sections of the CWPP address this concern with information on wildfire behavior and the most effective means of protecting people and buildings. Those who live next to wildland actually present a greater fire threat to the wildland than vice versa since humans start most wildfires. A primary theme of this CWPP is helping residents recognize that the best place to start wildfire protection is on their own property, on their side of the fence.

In a time of limited resources, both human and capital, it's important to establish priorities for dealing with an issue as vital as wildland fire mitigation. We can never afford to have enough firefighters or fire-fighting equipment for every home or person living in the WUI. Risk assessment is a critical part of the CWPP. Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) modeling, this report delineates existing and potential wildfire risks and threats down to a defined planning unit level within the county. Based on those risk levels, managers can deploy scarce wildfire mitigation resources where they are most needed on a priority basis, supported by hard data, rather than reacting to the loudest voices.

Verifying the GIS information takes work on the ground – putting professionals out in the field to assess a specific county site to understand what kind of fuels it has, how local conditions could affect any fire that might start there, and what steps can be taken to mitigate its impact. The Austin-Travis County CWPP deals at length with our fire environment: the role fire has historically played here, fire behavior, and fuel types.

Most every county citizen, regardless of how much time they've spent in the countryside, is familiar with our Hill Country's ubiquitous Ashe juniper, better known as the cedar tree. Conventional wisdom has told us that our central Texas juniper woodlands are similar to the chaparral of southern California, which regularly erupts in violent ignition to consume acres of California landscape and the WUI suburbs built around them.

Not so.

The junipers growing in the western part of the county, and redcedars in the eastern, are part of a fuel type and environment dissimilar to the west coast chaparral. Central Texas has a more humid climate, our junipers are more resistant to cold and drought, and they grow among hardwoods and grasslands with varying moisture contents. These central Texas trees and grasses -- fuel types -- are defined by this CWPP and their occurrence identified within the county.

If our constituents continue to build in proximity to these fuel types, what measures can they take to make their homes and businesses less susceptible to the inevitable wildfire? Mitigation measures are a large part of the CWPP. Fires only burn where and when they have fuel and reducing fuel around structures goes a long way in protecting property and lives, to include the lives of our firefighters. It's a noble thing for first-responders to sacrifice their lives for other citizens, but no firefighter should perish for houses or wildland.

Key to a building's survival in a wildfire is the ignitability of its materials – roof, siding – and its surrounding environment – trees and other vegetation growing nearby. An area up to 200 feet around a home is known as the Home Ignition Zone (HIZ). It's the space most vulnerable to a wildfire approaching the structure. This 200-foot zone is the area within the WUI where fuels mitigation pays the biggest dividends.

The first 30 feet around the home within this HIZ, called the Defensible Space, is the most important because the fuel here can catch your house on fire. Step back from your house and look at it as fuel rather than where you and your family live with many years of memories. Even if the home is not close to a greenbelt that might catch on fire, embers are capable of traveling miles on the wind before landing and starting a new fire. Embers will ignite dry oak blossoms and other debris in gutters and soon spread into the attic. You can't control where an ember will land but you can control what happens when it does land. This is the concept of home hardening, making our homes better able to withstand a wildfire.

Some compromises will have to be made to ensure our community becomes fire-resistant. Across the county there are 22 incorporated cities, thousands of neighborhoods and subdivisions, and many more groups with land-management responsibilities. Reconciling code and ordinance conflicts will be a big part to achieving our goal. As part of the CWPP mitigation discussion, there is a step-by-step framework for building a WUI code and how to implement it.

Ironically, and sadly, Bastrop County had a CWPP in place years before the 2011 fire. Perhaps the conditions of that weekend – drought, strong northerly winds, and downed power lines – would have destroyed much with or without a CWPP. But a plan such as this is of no value if it gathers dust on the shelf; it must be implemented. Under the current Texas Constitution, county commissioners have limited authority to establish and enforce code that would mitigate the devastating effects of a wildfire.

With almost unprecedented population growth in the WUI during a near-record-breaking drought, now is the time to take action to make our community a fire-resilient one, a community that can live in an environment that evolved with wildfires, a community whose citizens will take personal responsibility for making their property fire-resistant.

The hands of Austin and Travis County citizens are the best ones to protect their homes and property from wildfire.