



Office of the City Manager

CONSENT CALENDAR

January 30, 2024

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Dee Williams-Ridley, City Manager

Submitted by: David Sprague, Chief, Fire Department

Subject: Grant Application: Funding from California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) Wildfire Prevention Grant to Implement an Incentive Program for Residents in Berkeley's Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone

RECOMMENDATION

Adopt a Resolution authorizing the City Manager to apply for and accept a grant, and any amendments, from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) for up to the amount of \$1.1 Million to implement a defensible space program for residents of Berkeley's Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

There is no requirement for matching funds. The Department expects to expend approximately \$150,000 in staff time to perform inspections for the properties within the project scope.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Berkeley Fire Department is seeking funding to implement an incentive program for residents of Berkeley's Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone for up to \$2,900 for residents who demonstrate financial or physical hardship to complete the work required to meet the city's compliance standards and newly unfunded state mandates for defensible space. This grant will also fund a third-party grant administrator to manage the applications, including screening for application criteria demonstrating financial hardship and managing reimbursement requests and payment schedules.

This grant supports the City's Strategic Plan's goals and objectives as follows:

Goal 1: Create a resilient, safe, connected, and prepared City

3.23 Fire Prevention: Increase fire/life safety capacity and resources to effectively maintain community safety.

Goal 2: Be a customer-focused organization that provides excellent, timely, easily accessible service and information to the community.

9.10 Increase and improve communications from the Fire Department

Goal 3: Champion and demonstrate social and racial equity.

No specific objective; however, this program does address the socioeconomic equity of Berkeley's residents.

Program Objectives

In addition to Goals 1-3 listed above, this program provides Berkeley Residents with the following expanded Community service objectives:

- Budgeted funds for resident assistance to conduct work from 0-100 ft for those who cannot complete the work due to physical or financial hardship,
- Budgeted funds for public education to inform Residents about program enforcement and the importance of defensible space.

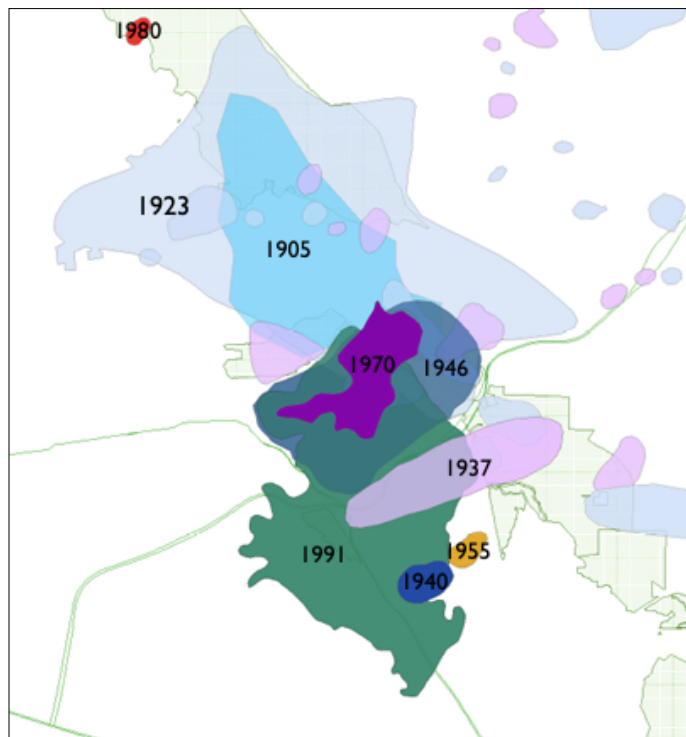
BACKGROUND

Berkeley has long faced an elevated risk of wildfires, having faced significant wildfires in 1905, 1923, 1946, 1970, and 1991. The map to the right shows the locations of these fires within the City, which generally correspond with the City's Very High Fire Danger Severity Zones.

Far from receding with time, the risk of catastrophic wildfire is growing due to changing conditions driven by climate change and development within the Bay Area. These growing risks demand new approaches in risk management and careful consideration of any policy changes that impact density, especially in the Fire Zones.

It is well-known that weather elements, including temperature, relative humidity, wind, and lightning, affect vegetation/wildland fire potential and behavior. Wind can be the most significant weather factor influencing vegetation/wildland fire behavior, with higher wind speeds increasing fire spread and intensity. High temperatures and low relative humidity also influence fire potential and behavior by drying out vegetative fuels, allowing such fuels to burn more readily and intensely. In Berkeley, weather conditions conducive to vegetation/wildland fires primarily occur during the summer and fall months, as strong winds develop, producing higher temperatures and lower humidity.

The City's topography also contributes to the fire risk in Berkeley's WUI. The City's topography transitions from being flat / sea level along the San Francisco Bay in the west, to steeper, sloped terrain approaching 1,000 feet in elevation in the Berkeley Hills along the City's eastern edge. The steeper, sloped terrain in the Hills can contribute to fire spread, because vegetation/wildland fires tend to burn more intensely and spread faster



when burning uphill and up-canyon. However, the hot, dry "Foehn" or "Diablo" winds from the northeast that occur especially during the spring and fall, and come from the northeast, can cause rapid downhill and down-canyon fire spread and were responsible for the fires in 1923 and 1991.

The vegetation within the WUI further contributes to fire risk. In addition to decorative landscape species, vegetative fuels within the Fire Zones consist of a mix of annual grasses and weeds, manzanita/knob cone, chaparral, deciduous, eucalyptus, cyprus, and mixed conifer tree species. These types of vegetation can burn intensely and contribute to rapid fire spread under the right fuel, weather, and topographic conditions. At the time of the 1923 Berkeley Fire, the Berkeley Hills were largely undeveloped, looking more like the Hills in the South Bay: open grassland, oak woodland, savanna, etc. However, many trees were planted over the course of the 20th Century as the Hills became more developed. Some of these trees are invasive and/or more flammable during a wildfire, such as the Italian Cyprus, Eucalyptus, and Acacia. Over time, these trees have altered Berkeley's natural landscape and dramatically increased the Hills' fire fuels.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

Ensuring Berkeley is complying with state and local wildfire prevention standards and emerging best practices will help prevent catastrophic wildfire and habitat loss post-wildfire.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

The Fire Department has identified an opportunity to help residents bring parcels into compliance with defensible space best practice that can present substantial hurdles to complete without financial assistance.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS CONSIDERED

None.

CONTACT PERSON

David Sprague, Fire Chief, 510-981-3473

Dan Green, WUI Division Chief

Attachments:

1: Resolution

GRANT APPLICATION: FUNDING FROM CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION (CAL FIRE) WILDFIRE PREVENTION GRANT TO IMPLEMENT AN INCENTIVE PROGRAM FOR LOW-INCOME AND PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED RESIDENTS IN BERKELEY'S VERY HIGH FIRE HAZARD SEVERITY ZONE

WHEREAS, the science around wildfire prevention is novel and is driving changes to best practices, regulations, and fire codes, and

WHEREAS, these grant funds will be used to make significant improvements in defensible space within the VHFHSZ, and

WHEREAS, grant funds may be used to support public education, support resident efforts to create defensible space, and fund a 3rd party administrator to manage grant requirements.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the City of Berkeley that the City Manager or her designee is authorized to apply for and accept a grant, and any amendments, from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) for up to \$1.1 Million to implement a vegetation management program for residents of Berkeley's Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone (VHFHSZ).