



Office of the City Manager

INFORMATION CALENDAR

September 9, 2025

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
From: Paul Buddenhagen, City Manager
Submitted by: David Sprague, Fire Chief
Subject: Fire Hazard Severity Zone 0 Implementation Plan

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an update on the progress of implementing the Zone 0 component of the Effective Measures for Berkeley's Ember Resilience (EMBER) initiative, adopted by the City Council on June 17, 2025. EMBER is a comprehensive strategy aimed at reducing ignition risk within the community during a wildfire through vegetation management, resident engagement, home hardening incentives, and interagency partnerships. Council adopted the portion of EMBER that added Zone 0 defensible space principals to the Berkeley Municipal Code.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

While the implementation plan is designed and launched, the Department has already taken meaningful action by narrowing the annual Defensible Space Inspection area from the former Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone (over 9,000 parcels) to the Grizzly Peak and Panoramic Mitigation areas; just under 1,400 properties.

The smaller inspection area allows residents to make individual, scheduled appointments – a long sought after enhancement to the program. Inspectors are spending up to an hour with each resident discussing compliance, mitigation strategies, and upcoming code changes, compared to minimal engagement during past annual inspections due to the volume.

During this transition period, inspectors have been following a two-step approach:

1. Perform one property walkthrough using the existing legacy code.
2. Perform a second walkthrough explaining the 2026 code requirements and working with residents to create phased work plans that guide them towards improving resilience without requiring immediate completion of all the work.

Note: Residents are only required to comply with the legacy code, but many are choosing to move ahead with efforts to begin alignment of their properties with the forthcoming Zone 0 code, which will be rolled out in 2026.

Resident Engagement

The Department has been tracking a significant increase in resident participation and in-person engagement with inspectors, including:

- **Full 360° inspections have increased from 36.3% to 55.6% (+19.3%),** a considerable improvement. Each full 360° inspection yields a more comprehensive recommendation for how a resident can reduce ignition risk and build resilience.
- **Residents walking with inspectors rose from 12.7% to 47% (+34.3%),** which results in a better understanding of the work that needs to occur.
- **Defensible space violations identified more than doubled** from the same period last year, from 244 to 571, indicating deeper and more thorough inspections.
- **Defensible space report engagement improved,** with 67.7% of residents opening their reports within 15 days, up from 59.7% last year.

Vegetation Management – Chipping Services

The chipping program, which provides removal of more substantial vegetation that does not fit in a green bin, at no charge to residents, provides additional data points that support the effectiveness of the new approach.

- Through July 2025 crews have performed 673 pickups, removing 2,384 cubic yards of material, that's **17% more pickups and 44% more volume than the same period in 2024.**
- Strong growth in new participants via word-of-mouth and neighborhood outreach.

BACKGROUND

The Department has developed a phased implementation plan to roll out the new Zone 0 requirements within the City's highest wildfire risk areas. This plan outlines the sequence of administrative, operational, and community engagement activities necessary to ensure a smooth transition. While the core milestones are established, the Department recognizes that implementation will require flexibility; adjustments will be made as needed based on lessons learned during each phase, particularly as the organization moves through the Fall and Winter of 2025.

Phase I – Administrative & Structural Changes (July 2025 – October 2025)

- **July 2025:**
 - Update maps on public facing GIS portal. Visit <https://berkeleyca.gov> and then search "GIS". Select the "Community GIS Portal" link.

- Scroll down to find the “Fire and Emergency Services” link.
 - Select members for the resident working group and create the administrative and logistical structure to support it.
 - Design, build and launch digital Right of Entry form to allow residents to provide advance written permission for 360° inspections without owner present.
 - Design and launch the new workflow for the Resident Assistance Program (RAP). RAP provides city support to bring a parcel into compliance with the Fire Code.
 - Design and launch a solicitation for professional fire-wise landscape planning services.
 - Reconfigure inspection software (pending any additional changes to the municipal code approved by Council in December 2025). The process of refining language in the software will continue through 2025 as feedback from inspections and resident interactions is used to improve the platform.
- **August 2025:**
 - Coordinate schedules with community members and launch the resident working group.
 - Run the first tranche of eligible properties through the RAP as a beta test and design, prepare and advertise a webinar for all eligible properties in September.
 - Begin a complete redesign of the Berkeley Fire Safe website to provide a more sophisticated and intuitive user interface, making it easier for residents to find and act on critical information. Key improvements will include targeted, parcel-specific guidance based on geographic location; a clearly organized, step-by-step approach that breaks requirements and best practices into manageable actions; and streamlined navigation to connect users quickly with resources, checklists, and compliance tools.
 - **September 2025:**
 - Testing and final modifications to the Berkeley Fire Safe webpage.
 - Begin procurement for a communications consultant to assist in designing and running a multi-channel Zone 0 outreach program with a goal to have a consultant selected and onboarded by November 2025.

- **October 2025:**

- Launch new Berkeley Fire Safe webpage with updated user interface, branding and messaging.
- Update all existing public-facing information (websites, printed guides, FAQs).

Outreach & Engagement Rollout (November 2025 – March 2026)

- **November 2025:**

- Finalize and launch outreach campaign with selected communications vendor. Potential components are outlined in the following months and are subject to change once a vendor is selected.
- Potential Step 1: Begin coordinated digital outreach (City email newsletters, social media, online ads).

- **December 2025 – January 2026:**

- Potential Step 2: Mail brochures and postcards to all affected parcels.
- Potential Step 3: Conduct public workshops, neighborhood Q&A sessions, and tabling at community events.

- **February – March 2026:**

- Begin inspector and staff training (classroom + field sessions).
- Potential Step 4: Partner with Home Owner Associations, neighborhood associations, FireWise groups, FireSafe Councils and local organizations for targeted outreach.
- Potential Step 5: Release short educational videos and “how-to” guides featuring local inspectors and subject matter experts.

Phase II – Beta Inspections (March 2025 – April 2026)

- **March 2026:**

- Conduct pilot inspections in selected neighborhoods.
- Analyze findings and make necessary program improvements.

- **March – April 2026:**

- Make final adjustments to program including staff training, messaging, policy and procedures.

Phase III – Full Implementation (May 2026 – Ongoing)

• **May 2026:**

- Begin Zone 0 inspection cycle across mitigation areas.
- Review data annually to refine outreach and enforcement.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

Reducing flammable vegetation and promoting fire-resistant landscaping supports climate adaptation goals, decreases wildfire-related greenhouse gas emissions, enhances preparedness, and preserves healthy mature trees.

POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTION

1. Continue low-volume, high-engagement inspection model.
2. Expand Resident Assistance Program scope and eligibility.
3. Increase nonprofit-managed home hardening funding.
4. Develop additional partnerships with regional Fire Safe Councils and grant-makers.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTION

All fiscal impacts are currently projected to be covered through the Department's baseline budget allocations or grant funding.

CONTACT PERSON

David Sprague, Fire Chief, Berkeley Fire Department, (510) 981-3473

ATTACHMENTS:

1: Current Coaching Guide for Residents. Note: Will be integrated into the Defensible Space Inspection software by the time of this Council meeting.

WILDFIRE HOME PROTECTION PLAN WORKSHEET

A PERSONALIZED GUIDE TO MEETING THE 2026 FIRE CODE

Property Address: _____ Resident Name: _____

Inspector(s): _____ Date: _____

Resources you Qualify for:

- Resident Assistance Program
- Home Hardening Mesh Program
- Eucalyptus Understory Program

Visit berkeleyfiresafe.org/programs, or email firesafe@berkeleyca.gov

Plan to address hazards in Ignition Zone 0 (0-5 ft. from a structure)

Priority items to be completed by May, 2026 (From structure out and ground up):

- Ground Cover
- Shrub Removal
- Limb Trees/Hedges within 5'
- Limb Trees (10' of roof)
- Remove Hedges
- Move combustible storage
- Re-pot plants into 5 gal. Containers
- Replace/Remove combustible gates/fences within 5'

Other: _____

Items to be addressed in the next phase of work (After 2026):

- ✓ _____
- ✓ _____

(continued on next page)

Plan to address hazards in Ignition Zone 1 (5-30 ft. from a structure)

Priority items to be completed by May, 2026 (From structure out and ground up):

Shrub Spacing:

Remove Ladder Fuels:

Separate Contiguous Fuels
(Hedges, etc):

Other:

Items to be addressed in the next phase of work (After 2026):

- ✓

- ✓

- ✓

Other notes:

FOLLOW UP FORM (IF NEEDED)

Date:

Inspector Name:

Resident Name:

Best Form of Resident Contact:

Information Needed:

Office Response: