



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: Update on the 2019 Berkeley Fire Prevention Division City Audit

INTRODUCTION

In May 2019, the City Auditor submitted a report to the City Council evaluating the Berkeley Fire Department's Fire Prevention Division (FP). The audit aimed to improve the Division's inspection program, enhance customer service, and reduce the risk of fire and related emergencies. A total of eleven recommendations were issued.

As of a status update in November 2022, two of the eleven recommendations had been dropped, seven were either started or partially implemented, and two had not yet been initiated.

The City Auditor's standard practice is to close all audits after five years. Delays in implementation stemmed primarily from the COVID-19 pandemic, which redirected Fire Prevention personnel to pandemic-related response duties.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

While the official audit was closed, Council requested that the City Manager report back with updates on the remaining feasible recommendations within the audit.

This work supports the City's Strategic Plan goal to create a resilient, safe, connected, and prepared city.

BACKGROUND

The Fire Prevention Division reports to the Deputy Fire Chief of Support Services, who in turn reports to the Fire Chief. The Division's scope includes planning, organizing, and executing fire prevention programs; conducting fire and arson investigations; enforcing codes; abating hazards; offering public fire safety education; and reviewing development plans.

The Division is staffed by:

- 1 Fire Marshal
- 1 Deputy Fire Marshal

- 2 Plans Examiners
- 5 Fire Inspector/Investigators
- 1 Management Analyst

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

This item does not directly affect environmental sustainability or climate goals. However, fire prevention efforts align with the broader objective of community resilience and environmental safety.

POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTION

No Council action is required at this time. The Fire Department will continue implementing the audit recommendations where feasible.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTION

There are no immediate fiscal impacts from this report. Any future resource needs related to audit recommendation implementation will be brought forward through the appropriate budget processes.

CONTACT PERSON

David Sprague, Fire Chief (510) 981-3473

Attachments:

- 1: Fire Prevention Audit Update Detail

This is an overview of each audit recommendation. While the Audit may be closed and the auditor has not reviewed the information below, the Department is working to continue evaluation and implementation of many of the items.

Finding 1: Fire Not Meeting Inspection Mandates Due to Extensive Code Requirements		
1.1	Recommendation:	<p>Fire analyze the short- and long-term impact of putting forth a change to the Berkeley Municipal Code to reduce the types or frequency of fire prevention inspections. (On Going)</p>
	Status as of June 11, 2025	<p>BLUF: (Started) In the next code adoption cycle (Fall/Winter 2025), the Department is planning to bring a proposal to amend Berkeley Municipal Code to be in alignment with the California Health & Safety requirements which do not require all occupancies to be inspected on an annual basis.</p> <p>Detail: In the next code adoption cycle (Fall/Winter 2025), the Department is planning to bring a proposal to amend Berkeley Municipal Code Section 12.50.040 – Applicability [of Fire Inspection Program] – “The provisions of this chapter shall apply to all commercial, industrial and institutional buildings and properties in the City of Berkeley and to residential structures of three units or more. (Ord. 5462-NS § 4, 1982)” to be in alignment with the California Health & Safety requirements which do not require all occupancies to be inspected on an annual basis.</p> <p>The Fire Prevention Division (FP) has been tracking new construction on an annual basis since 2019.</p> <p>In 2019, there were 47 projects with 3000 projected dwelling units under construction or in plan review. In 2024, there are 83 projects with 6,400 projected dwelling units.</p> <p>Despite two additional FTE added to FP and creating a new Wildland Urban Interface Division (WUI) that completes vegetation management inspections, this increased construction inspection workload has reduced the available time for annual fire prevention.</p> <p>The division is currently analyzing the list of annual inspections and determining which businesses need to be inspected by which resources. This analysis is on-going with the strategy of redistributing the most complex State mandated inspections amongst the full time sworn Fire Inspectors and away from Fire Suppression personnel who lack the time and level of training to ensure their completion at a high level of expertise.</p> <p>Further, the Division has reorganized its inspection districts by assigning an individual Sworn Fire Inspector to each Suppression</p>

Finding 1: Fire Not Meeting Inspection Mandates Due to Extensive Code Requirements

response district. This change will allow for Sworn Suppression personnel to have a direct point of contact within their first due fire response district when in need of a coordinated effort or a referral to the FP Division based upon an atypical circumstance that is outside of their bandwidth. This also will directly increase the efficiency of each Sworn Fire Inspector as they will now have most if not all of their Mandated Annual inspections within a single fire station's first due. This will allow for a better knowledge of their first due area and ability to get work done without extended travel in between inspection sites.

Lastly, all "H" (Hazardous Materials) occupancies have been assigned to a Sworn Fire Inspector who has vast knowledge and experience in this highly specialized area. This change has already begun to pay dividends as some incredibly dangerous conditions have been discovered during routine inspections and facility after facility has been identified without having proper fire protection coverage and the appropriate permits per the CFC. The hope is to complete this strategic migration throughout the remainder of the calendar year.

1.2	Recommendation:	Fire perform a workload analysis to quantify the staff needed now, and in the future, to comply with the local requirements. (On Going)
	Status as of June 11, 2025	<p>BLUF: (Completed) Two additional FTE have been added, but an additional workload analysis may be conducted if the pace of construction/development sustains or increases.</p> <p>Detail: An internal analysis was completed and the Council approved the re-organization of the Fire Prevention Division in 2022.</p> <p>Fire Prevention staffing has increased from One Sworn and Two Civilian Inspectors to Five Sworn Inspectors.</p> <p>Additionally, the Department launched the Wildland Urban Interface Division that has taken over all the vegetation management work and over 9,200 inspections that was previously the responsibility of Fire Prevention.</p> <p>However, the Department may perform another workload analysis due to the volume at which construction/development has increased. In 2019 there were approximately 47 projects with 3000 projected dwelling units under construction or in plan review. In 2024, there are approximately 83 projects with 6,400 projected dwelling units.</p> <p>With the implementation of a new Developmental systems software and Fire Record Management System (FRMS) in the coming year, the Department will have the ability to have a more streamlined and organized data collection process to quantify both workload and work hours which we will cross reference with the current budget and new fee schedule being adopted this summer 2025 to drive a further need to conduct an additional workload analysis.</p>

Finding 2: Fire Replies on Incomplete Data to Manage Inspections		
2.1	Recommendation:	Fire, in consultation with Planning and Information Technology Departments, develop a process for sharing information property changes and additions between Fire and Planning’s database platforms. (Completion by end of 2025)
	Status as of June 11, 2025	<p>BLUF: (Dropped) The current Fire Record Management software cannot be configured to improve this process. The Department is planning a procurement process for CY2025-26.</p> <p>Detail: The Fire Department engaged with Information Technology (IT) and the Fire Record Management System (FRMS) software vendor in an attempt to devise and implement a technology fix or workaround to allow the automated update of property owner database records. Based on feedback from IT and the FRMS software vendor, these efforts have not yielded any positive results and the vendor has indicated they are not making further efforts to implement such a change.</p> <p>The Department is pursuing a procurement process for FRMS software in the 2025-26. This change will pay dividends quickly for both the efficiency of a mobile inspection platform, as well as a streamlined billing platform.</p>
2.2	Recommendation:	<p>Fire work with both the database’s software vendor and the Information Technology Department to strengthen controls over the database, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Assess the needs for required fields for processing an inspection, such as unit, shift, inspector name, address, violation details, and violation location. ○ Format drop-down menus for inspection status, inspection type, and violation status. Format the options available for the violation code numbers and violation description fields. <p>(Completion by end of 2025)</p>
	Status as of June 11, 2025	<p>BLUF: (Dropped) The current Fire Record Management software cannot be configured to improve this process. The Department is planning a procurement process for CY2025-26.</p> <p>Detail: The Fire Department has engaged with the Information Technology Department (IT) and the Fire Record Management System (FRMS) software vendor to explore the implementation of various technology fixes. Based on feedback from IT and the software vendor, implementing other types of changes called for would</p>

Finding 2: Fire Replies on Incomplete Data to Manage Inspections

constitute extensive customization of the software. While it may be feasible to customize the software package in some instances, these customizations often negatively impact the software’s stability, the ability of the software vendor to support the software, and requires extensive staff support to maintain the software package after customization.

Based on the potential pitfalls and limitations associated with further customizing the software, the Department has determined that the benefits of the Recommendation do not outweigh the risks and limitations imposed by those Recommendations. The Fire Department understands the spirit and intent of the Recommendations. Assessments of potential future Fire Record Management System software packages can use the contents of the Recommendations to help inform the City’s assessment of candidate software packages.

Finding 3: Fire Staff Do Not Have Enough Support to Get Inspections Done		
3.1	Recommendation:	Fire Prevention coordinate work plans with Suppression for all mandated prevention inspections. These should take into consideration the volume and nature of the other work Suppression performs. (Completed)
	Status as of June 11, 2025	<p>BLUF: (Started) An analysis of annual fire prevention inspections completed by each engine company on each shift during Fiscal Year 2024 was delivered to the Deputy Fire Chiefs and Fire Chief in August 2024.</p> <p>The Department has also assigned a senior member of the FP team to work on updating policies and procedures that will be completed by the end of 2025.</p> <p>These policies and procedures are a work in progress but a significant amount of work has been completed including updates to the following policies and procedures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire Investigations procedures • Operations Fire Investigations policy • Fire Alarm checklist • Knox Box checklist and requirements • Special Events checklist • Fire Prevention Division Program update • False Alarm policy and procedure • Administrative Citation policy and procedure • Vehicle Procedure • Tool Cache inventory and purchase for Fire Investigations
3.2	Recommendation:	Fire create a risk assessment plan to identify those properties that are most at risk of a fire. (Completed)
	Status as of June 11, 2025	<p>BLUF: (Completed) The Community Wildfire Prevention Plan was completed in April 2023 and the Department is working through the associated action plan.</p> <p>Detail: The Community Wildfire Prevention Plan was completed in April 2023. Substantial work to rebuild and enhance the City’s inspection and enforcement program has been underway all with aim of reducing the risk of wildfire.</p> <p>For fire inspection activities within the built-environment, the State of California’s mandates for fire inspection already establishes a fire risk assessment model and establishes fire prevention inspection</p>

Finding 3: Fire Staff Do Not Have Enough Support to Get Inspections Done

		priorities on a state-wide basis. The State's mandates specify which types of occupancies are required to be inspected, and on what frequency. The State's priorities are the product of many inputs including national and state-wide fire loss history and trends, trends in developing fire hazards and risks, and to some extent societal and political sensitivities.
3.3	Recommendation:	The Fire Chief will issue a General Order to the Department on the importance and necessity of performing Fire Prevention Inspections. (Complete by August 2025)
	Status as of June 11, 2025	BLUF: (Started) The Department has assigned a senior member of the FP team to work on updating policies and procedures that will be completed by the end of 2025.
3.4	Recommendation:	The Fire Marshal and Suppression Management jointly develop a communication plan between Fire Prevention and Suppression. (Completion by July 2026)
	Status as of June 11, 2025	BLUF: (Started) The Department has been working to streamline communications between Fire Prevention and Suppression. Additional work has yet to be done on developing the role of the Shift Fire Inspectors. This program will be revamped in the Fall of 2025 with changes projected to take effect in July of 2026 contingent on labor negotiations, training and budget capacity.
3.5	Recommendation:	Fire revise the Fire Prevention Inspection training to provide hands-on training, using experienced Suppression staff, on how to conduct inspections and interact with residents and community members during inspections. (On Going)
	Status as of June 11, 2025	BLUF: (Completed): Fire Prevention staff re-designed the annual fire inspection training for Suppression. The Department has assigned a senior member of the FP team to work on updating policies and procedures that will be completed by the end of 2025.
3.6	Recommendation:	Fire develop and distribute educational information to property owners prior to the beginning of the inspection cycle to provide information on the Fire Prevention Inspection program, common violations, and any upcoming inspections for that area of the City. (Completed)

Finding 3: Fire Staff Do Not Have Enough Support to Get Inspections Done

	<p>Status as of June 11, 2025</p>	<p>BLUF: (Completed) The Department has hired an FTE Communications Specialist who is working in conjunction with other staff to keep webpages updated and send annual information via email and US Mail to residents about the City’s inspection programs.</p> <p>Detail: In March 2023, the Fire Department, in conjunction with the City Manager’s Office, hired a full-time employee as a Communications Specialist. Their duties include the development and delivery of education and outreach materials, including fire inspection, vegetation management, and other fire-related materials.</p> <p>Starting in 2021, the Fire Department began annual direct outreach to and the transmittal of educational materials to the entire population of Berkeley Fire Zones 2 and 3. This outreach was conducted in preparation for the annual defensible space inspections.</p> <p>Revamping of the City’s website for the fire department has been substantially completed and is considered a living document to provide access to the community on all facets of fire safety, including the fire inspection program.</p>
<p>3.7</p>	<p>Recommendation:</p>	<p>Fire create a process for issuing, tracking, and following up on Administrative Citations for properties with repeat or high-risk violations, including revenue collections and tracking. That process should collaborate with other City work units that perform enforcement activities to provide consistency. (Completed)</p>
	<p>Status as of June 11, 2025</p>	<p>BLUF: (Completed) The Department has procured and implemented a new digital citation software.</p> <p>Detail: The Department worked to procure and onboard a new digital citation software that the WUI Division is actively using for the first inspection cycle in FY25. This platform is currently being implemented within FP.</p> <p>The Property Collaborative Review team (PCR) meets once a month to discuss properties on the team’s list that are either in need of a notice of violation and order to abate letter or in need of follow-up such as enforcement or re-inspection.</p>