

CITY OF OAKLAND



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Office of the Fire Chief
Reginald D. Freeman

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To: William A. Gilchrist, Director, Planning and Building Department
Re: Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Planning Code Amendments and Restrictions in the High Fire Severity Zone

Date: October 26, 2021

Dear Council President Bas and Members of the City Council,

I am offering this letter of support for the revised staff proposal regarding the ADU Planning Code Amendments and the restrictions that are included on parcels located in the Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone (VHFHSZ).

Oakland's history of wildfires is no secret in California, the Oakland firestorm of 1991 was one of the largest urban wildfires in history. The fire started on the border of Oakland and spread throughout the Berkeley hills. Ultimately 25 lives were lost, 150 people were injured, 1,520 acres of land was burned, and thousands of homes were destroyed. The high winds, steep terrain, and heavy fuel load made fighting this historic blaze a major challenge. The economic loss from the fire was estimated at \$1.5 billion.

Nearly 30 years later, with the clear intent to align City departments in the interest of safety and preparedness, City Council adopted Resolution 87940 C.M.S. in 2019 declaring Wildfire Prevention as a top priority for the city and this led to the creation of the Wildfire Prevention Working Group. The strategic working group entrusts several departments to ensure Oakland is taking a coordinated approach to prevention. That has elevated the importance of the Planning Department's contribution to prevention through appropriate zoning restrictions. The working group meetings cover a range of issues related to immediate fire safety challenges, ongoing hazard mitigation, with a strong emphasis on coordination between departments and nearby jurisdictions, and community stakeholders.

Now more than ever, Oakland residents and communities throughout the region are looking for their government to take proactive steps to increase and promote public safety and reduce wildfire risk. A surge in ADUs in the VHFHSZ project put new and existing residents at risk during mass evacuations during wildfires. .

It remains the belief of the working group that adding ADUs and creating a higher level of density, fuel load, and congestion in the fire prone Oakland hills will be hazardous to everyone in the high fire risk communities, including the very people the new ADUs are designed to serve.

It is important to note that the Fire Department is not making this recommendation in vacuum. The Fire Department conducts a range of actions on an annual basis that have played a critical role in preventing Oakland from experiencing the types of wildfire events that we continue to see in cities across California and in neighboring states. Those actions include:

- Proactive annual inspections of over 25,000 privately, city-owned and vacant parcels.

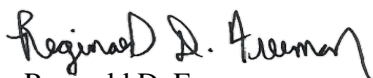
- Deploying one of the largest goat herds in the state. Each year goats prove to be a valuable and cost-effective fire prevention tool. In 2021, goats have cleared approximately 900 acres of hazardous and hard to reach dry vegetation.
- Contracting with vendors each year to mitigate hazardous vegetation on city owned property, clearing 60 miles of vegetation along roadways in addition to hundreds of acres of vegetation on public parcels.
- For the last two years, over July 4th weekend in partnership with neighboring jurisdictions, Oakland Fire and Oakland Police have proactively closed stretches of roadways and scenic lookouts along both Grizzly Peak and Skyline boulevards to prevent large gatherings and hazard activity and stop illegal parking that might cause delays in emergency responses along that hillside corridor.
- Closing parks, upstaffing fire crews, doing roving patrols, and pushing out extensive public messaging during Red Flag Warning and extreme weather events.
- Establishing the Fire Safe Streets Program with the city's Department of Transportation whereby the two departments have conducted an inventory of streets in the High Fire Severity Zone and identified multiple "choke points" where it is very difficult for a fire engine to get through. Once identified, the departments begin the lengthy process of conducting outreach to residents about proposed changes to parking restrictions, signage, and enforcement.
- Launching the Know Your Zone campaign in partnership with Zonehaven. Now every Oakland resident lives in an evacuation zone identified by a number so they can stay informed in the event that their community is being evacuated.

Planning Staff, in partnership with the Fire Department brought forward a proposal this summer to restrict ADUs in the Very High Fire Severity Zone. We heard the concerns raised by the Planning Commission that the restrictions went too far. The staff went back to work with the requested approach that the restrictions be refined and made more precise.

Following an extensive evaluation process, the Fire Department holds firm that prohibiting the the development of ADU's in the CAL Fire designated VHFHSZ is the best approach to preventing loss of life and property to wildfire. However, I believe that staff have been thoughtful and diligent in their efforts to identify two options that balance the need to responsibly address California's housing crisis and protect Oaklanders from the very real threat of wildfire.

I wish to recognize the dedicated staff for their responsiveness and the Planning Commission for their consideration of this important issue. I encourage members of the City Council to contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns regarding the Fire Department's position on this issue.

Thank you for your consideration,


Reginald D. Freeman

Chief, Oakland Fire Department