

Environmental Commission September 18, 2019

Item 7B: WUI Code

Attendees: Mark Baker, Nate Casebeer, Chris Herrington

Mark Baker: Thank you for your comments. We are here to talk about WUI Code to improve the safety of structures in Austin.

Mark Baker: We could remove fire resistant walls, doors, and windows from the code.

Commissioner: Do you have this written down?

Mark: No. I could add some comments on the draft and have it by next week.

Commissioner: Say it again.

Mark: We would not require it through the WUI areas or existing conditions. We could look at it for existing properties. We will require defensible space if it is a hazard to life and property. We could remove fire resistant materials table from the WUI Code.

Citizen Communication: We could not support the Code as it is. I am proud of Fire wise and have attended meetings since 2011. It is one thing to do something voluntarily, and a whole other can of worms to make requirements with lawyers and code. It is hard to harden the home. Then the defensible space. Embers can really fly. Homes will catch fire. Requiring remodels is great. Enforcing defensible space is not good. It is not easy to change. We must look at the whole area. AFD can train people. The process that is proposed has a reviewer, rather than an inspector, to look at the site. This is looking good.

Commissioner: I saw the Golden Cheek Warbler info you sent, thank you.

Commissioner: This includes land from PARD and easements. Fire can start anywhere.

Mark: Yes. The whole city needs to work together. AFD wants to do more outreach.

Nate: According to the data, historically more fire occurrences start on the east side of Austin because the fuels are finer. We want to bring more awareness to the east side, and get them more involved in fire wise.

Commissioner: I remember West Lake Hills has water lines that are not large enough to take care of a fire.

Nate: Yes, we are concerned. We are working with Austin Water and our engineers to take a look at that hazard.

Commissioner: Westlake Hills is a danger to Austin.

Nate: They are a fire wise area; we are working with them.

Commissioner: This proposal is just for Austin.

Nate: Yes. The City of Austin could be a leader and adopt the WUI Code. Other communities would follow.

Commissioner: We could be a model.

Commissioner: What about existing homes with overgrown yards?

Nate: We are looking at 30 meter square areas to assess fire risk. Land that is overgrown needs to be addressed. Onion creek could be better managed. We need the whole area to be fire wise. Our drone team can help gather information on public lands, but not on private lands. We need people to report overgrown properties on 311.

Mark: We recognize distinct hazards.

Commissioner: I appreciate AFDs work. How far back should limbs be from a house?

Mark: It depends on many factors. There are arborists who have trained to look at a structure and evaluate the property. Many of our trees do not have a leaf canopy to carry crown fires. We are looking at extreme drought conditions.

(3 minute Break)

Commissioner: I need clarification: this requires 1 hour fire resistant wood on fences?

Mark: Fences can carry fire to a house. There is difficulty with the language here. I meant fences where they attach to the house. I would be open to that to decrease the environmental impact.

Commissioner: Motion for 7B? WUI code not requiring defensible space?

Commissioner: I agree with most of these conditions. Some requirements for defensible space have good intention, but not good implementation. All tree work needing to be done by arborist is too much. Not all trees will need an arborist. Only trees that are native or protected. Could we amend the wording to "any work on protected trees with diameters of 8 inches or more should be done by an arborist"?

Commissioner: The location of the tree is important, not the size.

Commissioner: Homeowners need to be able to do trim their own trees.

Mark: Arborists have Texas qualifications with Wild fire Qualifications.

Nate: Field crews have an arborist that over sees a group.

Commissioner: Change work by an arborist to overseen by an arborist.

Commissioner: What are the roof requirements to prevent embers from starting fires?

Commissioner: People are required to create defensible space.

Mark: We are no longer requiring new construction to create defensible space.

Commissioner: Strike language about defensible space.

Commissioner: We need time to review this. We have great ideas, but they may not be practical for the fire department.

Chris Herrington: They have a schedule and need us to past this motion tonight.

Mark: I picked up on these changes; we can work with these changes. I will include these changes on the draft for the meeting next week.

