

# City Council Special Called Meeting Transcript – 8/22/2023

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[3:00:30 PM]

I WILL CALL TO ORDER THE SPECIAL CALLED MEETING OF THE AUSTIN CITY COUNCIL. IT IS TUESDAY, AUGUST 22ND, 2023. AT THREE O'CLOCK, WE ARE MEETING IN THE CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS AT AUSTIN CITY HALL, WHICH IS LOCATED AT 301 WEST SECOND STREET IN AUSTIN, TEXAS. MEMBERS, UH, OUR PURPOSE FOR BEING HERE IS TO ADDRESS, UM, THE, THE DECLARATION OF DISASTER THAT REQUIRES US TO, TO GATHER WITHIN SEVEN DAYS. AFTER THAT. I WANT, I WANTED TO JUST SAY, MAKE A FEW COMMENTS, AND THEN WE'RE GONNA HAVE A STAFF PRE PRESENTATION OF A COUPLE THINGS, SO THAT WE'LL BE UP TO DATE ON WHERE THINGS ARE, AND THEN, UH, I'LL ASK FOR A MOTION. UM, BUT WE GOT HERE BECAUSE LAST WEEK, KNOWING THAT AUSTIN RANKS SIXTH IN THE NATION IN THE VALUES OF HOMES AT RISK OF WILDFIRE, AND KNOWING THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT WE'RE LIVING UNDER CURRENTLY WITH THE PERSISTENT EXTREME HEAT, THE HIGH WINDS AND THE DROUGHT CONDITIONS, AND THE FACT THAT WE'VE ALREADY HAD NUMEROUS WILDFIRES THAT HAVE OCCURRED IN THE CITY OF AUSTIN AND TRAVIS COUNTY. I EXERCISED THE AUTHORITY THAT IS ALLOWED UNDER THE CHARTER AND UNDER TEXAS LAW TO ISSUE A DECLARATION OF DISASTER IN ORDER TO PROACTIVELY POSITION OUR COMMUNITY TO SECURE STATE AND FEDERAL RESOURCES QUICKLY IF THE NEED ARISES, AND TO PUT US IN A SITUATION TO RESPOND MORE QUICKLY. BY STATE LAW,

[3:01:57 PM]

The disaster declaration only remains in effect for seven days. But extreme temperatures and high winds continue to place us at serious wildfire risk. And we all know we're not out of danger yet. So extending the disaster declaration is critical and that requires a vote of council, which is, as I indicated, why we're here today over the last few months, we've called on all of our residents to take steps necessary to keep yourselves and your community, our community safe. If I speak to our constituents in saying that we

have shared several resources to help austinites prepare themselves for the next disaster. Esther, I want to go over a few important steps that we need everyone's help with right now. So one, prevent joint fires before they start that sounds simple, but we need people to properly dispose of their cigarettes their oil or grease soaked rags. Don't park your vehicle on dry grass and

[3:02:58 PM]

your vehicle on dry grass and please, please follow burn bans. Second, please sign up for emergency alerts at warn central Texas dot org. Because of my accent, I'm going to spell warn . As I heard myself speak, I realized that's going to cause some people to think the wrong word. W a R N C. E. N T. R. A L T E. X a. S dot org. Org this is one of the key ways is for our fire department to notify you if there's the need for an evacuation due to a wildfire. And three have of your what we call your go bag or emergency kit. Ready think of the five P's people and pets. Paryski options. Personal items and

[3:04:00 PM]

options. Personal items and papers. If you need tips on how to build a go bag or an emergency kit, visit ready? My central Texas .org and you'll note that all of you all everybody on the dais you have your very own go bag although if you remember the five P's, there are things that you'll probably want to put in there that are your personal items. I will tell the public council knows this, but our our professional staff continues to work with partner agencies to ensure that we're prepared as possible to respond and to the next disaster. Yeah, we hope that doesn't occur, but we are preparing ourselves in case it does. In my role that is outlined in statute, I continue to stay in close contact with the manager and our director of emergency management. And with that, I'll turn it over to the city manager. Yeah, mayor. >> Council. Thank you. The I'd

[3:05:00 PM]

>> Council. Thank you. The I'd like to call on Mr. Mills to chief mills to introduce this and, and then he's going to call on director snipes to be able to provide the detail. Mayor and manager, if I may, there's a couple of members of the dais who are virtual. >> I would like to encourage their staffs to come down and get their go bags. >> We'll make sure they get them. >> It's \$20 a piece. So had to be here to win it. >> Sorry. Good afternoon. Thank you. Thank you. First of all, cities, our homeland security department, as you said, mayor, has been meeting regularly with all of our departments, fire departments, been meeting almost daily with with our supporting departments to ensure that we are prepared to respond and activate in the event of a wildfire. And I was going to introduce Ken snipes up now, but I think if you don't mind, let me take a little bit out of order. I want to introduce chief de la Rosa, assistant chief of the fire department. He spent a lot of time we've been in meetings with him, but he's been

[3:06:01 PM]

meetings with him, but he's been an inordinate amount of time working on this for preparing for the ultimate piece of this, which would be evacuation. And if he could, he could talk and give you some very good information, some points you might want to consider. Before we go further, please do. Chief de la Rosa, chief, welcome. Thank you. >> Good afternoon, mayor. City council city manager, assistant city manager and directors. I'm assistant chief Andre de la Rosa with Austin fire department. I have the pleasure and honor of being in charge of our wildfire division. Despite today's highly anticipated possibility of rain . It is very small and we will still and continue to be in a very elevated wildfire risk. Our live fuel moistures have dropped below 70 into to what we consider critical dangers. These are the same levels we saw in 2011. As the mayor said, prevention of ignition is

[3:07:02 PM]

prevention of ignition is paramount. So please encourage your residents and your members of your districts to prevent at even the slightest spark. If a wildfire does happen. Our Austin fire department is working with the local regional ISD's to have a consist and consolidated response to that so that no matter where the wildfire happens, if it crosses boundaries, the people in our region can expect the same response of primary priority in any incident. And wildfire being paramount is life safety. When our firefighters and first responders arrive on scene, if they determine that evacuation is the best way to save lives, we will not fight the fire. We will start evacuation. That it will take away in many different manners. It will be knocking on the door. It will be blasting it from public address systems from our apparatus, and it will be through Warren central Texas.

[3:08:04 PM]

through Warren central Texas. High critical for everyone to sign up for Warren, central Texas, as the mayor said, when a public safety responder, firefighter, police paramedic, anyone tells you or your residents to evacuate, please do so quickly. And orderly in a calm manner. After grabbing your go bags. What we learned in 2011, in steiner ranch. It has to be a controlled and phased evacuation. Otherwise we run the risk of overloading our drive sheds. Our roadways will get encumbered, which could cause is very dangerous. Traffic jams and impede the ingress of our fire safety personnel who are trying to go and address that additional flee. When firefighters or public safety are directing y'all to evacuate or anyone they will use it, potentially use a term called a

[3:09:07 PM]

potentially use a term called a temporary assembly point. But if we're asking you to go, we're going to tell you where to go that is safe. A temporary assembly point is merely an area that has a large parking lot that has been pre-designed, gated, or is known to be a safe location where people can gather. We will have someone there to be a manager who will gather the information. Even if your residents have a great safe place, a grandmother or a family member's house, that would willingly take them in for the short period of time during that wildfire. You can go there. Please stop by the temporary assembly point so that we can gather your information so we can have accountability of everyone who is in that area so we can make sure we've got everyone out. If you do not go there, we will be working with our our hisam and our pios to put that a survey out through the media. So even if you missed that step because it is a confusing time, please do take the time to check in with our

[3:10:08 PM]

the time to check in with our public safety organizations. It is a critical and dangerous time out there. We're going to work together as a community, as first responders, as city leaders to keep ourselves set up for as safe of a reaction as we can. Thank you. I'll pass it over to director Schneider. >> Thank you, chief. We've had an opportunity over the last couple of years to meet pretty regularly about wildfire. And as you know, I'm very concerned about the evacuation process and appreciate how you how you laid it out. One of the things that concerns me is a few years ago, it was very clear that our battalion chiefs had not been exercised in Ann evacuations. And we heard this from frontline firefighters that, yeah, they were out in west Austin. They didn't know the evacuation plan. So if I went and talked to a battalion chief today who was in charge, say, of jester and

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charge, say, of jester and obviously the evacuation route and the approach changes depending on where the fire is and whatnot, what. But would they have recently reviewed those evacuation plans? >> Is yes, ma'am. As a matter of fact, as our training progresses, as you've been a critical component in helping us get it through, we've put we're in the process of putting the whole department through, responding to the interface training, which is a nationally regarded training on how to deal with urban interface fires, not the giant wildland fires that we see in the west coast, but what we have in ours on top of that, we are doing constant when we get to seasonal, we do increased training on that. Just recently as we finalized out the temporary assembly point procedures and how they were pre-identified and how to find it on the digital tools available to them. We're doing just in time training every single shift change division Ann chief Kerry Stewart has been out there instructing all our battalion chiefs. So even if

[3:12:10 PM]

battalion chiefs. So even if we've had recently promoted battalion chiefs who may not have been in this role for long, they will have that just in time training to talk about evacuation and the different facets of that. We are working highly with our our partners in homeland security and emergency management to work with our fellow public safety departments on what their roles and responsibilities are so we can always continue to strive to do a better and better response. But I feel like we have been upping the tempo and increased the our capabilities and our preparedness for that to match what the city leadership has been pushing and what our community expects from us. >> Thank you. And then not on evacuation, but can you tell us how you're changing the operational choices based on the level of risk? So, for instance, we have brush trucks. They're not always staffed all the time. How are you staffing those and at what level? And yes, so as we change the risk level. >> Yes, ma'am. As many of you all know, Austin fire department

[3:13:13 PM]

all know, Austin fire department has a vast variety of different apparatus that are spread throughout the city. We try to point those in areas where they will have the best response times or the most appropriate placement. We have our wildfire battalion stations, point positioned in the locations in our eastern and western crescent that have the highest statistical probability. And from what our our wildfire risk modeling shows for a large evacuation Ann or rapidly moving wildfire, we still have other brush trucks that are spread throughout the area. Normally when we're dealing with hurricanes or winter storms, those are what we call cross staffed. The units are assigned to those stations would either be on the fire engine or have the capability of deploying a team to follow in that during increase at, say, two weeks ago, we'd have those brush trucks ghosting or following following the our engines out so they'd be

[3:14:13 PM]

the our engines out so they'd be permanently out there to decrease the response time as we got to just a week and a half, two weeks ago. And we have the nfds a very high and that that high pressure system there, we actually went and started up staffing those people are not going to be filled with and staffed with people from that engine. But we actually have personnel assigned to those brush trucks. We also stand up what we call our wildfire task force, which is a group of individuals that are separate, that can surge to wherever we are needed in the eventuality that we get to nfds national fire danger rating system of extreme, which would be the next step. Currently, we are in very high if we get to too extreme and we have additional factors either due to the consistency of the fuels or the activity of the fires, we can even up staff to a higher amount in a in a scalable approach to the appropriate risk . >> Do you have a brush truck in northwest Austin? Do you have a

[3:15:14 PM]

northwest Austin? Do you have a staffed brush truck in northwest Austin? >> A northwest Austin? I I'd have to check, but we have four different ones that are spread in the different corners as well in the area. So, yes. >> Okay. I would appreciate if you could get back to me. My understanding is that there's one staffed where it's not the highest risk and there is not one in northwest Austin, even though we have a truck, we'll follow up. >> Man thank you. >> Thank you. Council member, director snipes. And thank you, chief. Appreciate your being here. Yes, sir. >> Mayor, council knell Ken snipes director Austin homeland security and emergency management. I'm going to start by having Sarah Henry Pio for the homeland security and emergency management branch come up and talk a little bit about what's in your go bag with the idea that this is a tool for you all to use. First and foremost, but to help your constituents also understand the types of things that they might consider putting in their own go bags as they prepare, prepare for an emergency or an evacuation. >> Thank you. Director snipes.

[3:16:18 PM]

>> Thank you. Director snipes. Good afternoon, mayor and council. You've all been provided with a bag bag with full of supplies from the office of homeland security and emergency management. And our ask for you today is to help us get the community prepared. And so a little bit about what you can find in your bag. There are general emergency preparedness items, Luz for personal safety. So there's an all weather radio, which is noaa equipped so that it can also be programed in Spanish and in English. There is a document bag in there so that people can put their important documents, social security cards , any medical information, prescriptions. In addition to that, there are items for pets. So we want to make sure that we are helping the community prepare their pets to be safe. So any items that might be needed for them, like food or prescriptions as well. Additionally, when people are evacuating kids are really important. So we want to make sure that not only do you have things for children, but folks also have things to help keep their kids occupied. So crayons

[3:17:18 PM]

their kids occupied. So crayons and colors and their favorite stuffed animals. So really the idea is that we are helping the community to evacuate safely and think ahead. So that they can have all the items packed near their door in the event that we do need to evacuate and are asked to you, mayor and council would be that you take these items us and help us promote to the community via your social media accounts that they can also help you prepared by having their own go kit. And then they can also get these items and have their own bag by attending one of our many outreach events , the next one being our get ready central Texas emergency preparedness fair, which will be on Friday, September 22nd from 3 to 7. So mayor, as you mentioned, this and all of our other information is at the ready central texas.org website. Thank you so much for your help and preparing our community director

snipes. Thank you all. >> Again, just want to start off by letting you know a bit about what some of the departments are do. And as we work to prepare for not only this upcoming wildfire season, but other

[3:18:19 PM]

wildfire season, but other incidents as well, but just to kick this off, I just want to start with letting you know that we're working closely with the departments each day in event of an emergency activation each and every year. Austin fire department, along with Austin water, work together to conduct pressure and water flow testing on our hydrants to ensure that local fire hydrants are working and that they have proper pressure and are ready to go when needed. Austin water also conducts regular facility assessments to identify high wildfire risk and areas for fuel reduction that are critical to protecting infrastructure. Austin water also manages wildland properties and reduced wildfire threats with shade with shade shaded fuel breaks to make sure again, that we don't have uncontrolled wildfire spreading across some of our areas. The transportation and public works department along with watershed protection and Austin resource recovery, continue removing fallen trees and debris and

[3:19:20 PM]

fallen trees and debris and other vegetation. As a result of previous storms. Again to help reduce the wildfire risk, Austin energy has added a wildfire mitigation program manager and that person is working in coordination with Austin Travis county and their wildfire coalition, which includes the Austin fire department, as well as our emergency service districts in case of wildfire. The Austin energy in the Austin energy service area, the Austin fire department's joint dispatch center has direct contact with Austin energy's control center and can shut off power to, if necessary, to keep public safety personnel and customers safe. To reduce the risk of wildfire related to homeless encampments. We are working to quickly stand up the marshaling yard ahead of its planned opening date and I believe it was open today, correct. And the contractor working there is endeavors. That is our nonprofit vendor, and

[3:20:21 PM]

is our nonprofit vendor, and they will serve as the on site manager and service provider. Crews worked through the weekend to set up the marshaling yard and will begin receiving client referrals starting today. As per the contract, the facility can accommodate up to 300 people. However app approval will be required before endeavors exceeds 200 people. This allows us to assess the operations and the neighborhood impact before expanding to our full number. The city and partner community organizations have also already begun conducting outreach to encampments. They started with encampments that are near the marshaling yard and also in several high wildfire, high risk sites that have been identified in cooperation with the Austin fire department. We'll be tracking shelter census

closely and expanding referral pathways over time. I am proud to share the progress that we've made so far. Our staff has worked quickly and collaboratively to implement these efforts.

[3:21:24 PM]

implement these efforts. >> Mayor thank you, director. Anybody have any questions of the director? Councilmember Fuentes thank you. >> Thank you. Director snipes as far as receiving an update on the marshaling yard, when can we expect that kind of first update of how things are going? >> We're going to have Diana gray come up our homeless services officer. Thank you. >> Council member will certainly be updating at our regular public health committee meetings, but are happy to do so informally between now and then. And so we can commit, I think, to getting Lang council. A quick update at the end of the first week of operation burns. Okay >> Thank you. >> Thank you. Council member, mayor pro tem and then council member Kelly. >> Thank you, mayor. I don't have questions. I just want to say thank you. We have one of the brush trucks down southwest and they had to put out brush fires very close to actually where the station was. And so we tweeted about it. We had a constituent in the avonia neighborhood send us some photos

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neighborhood send us some photos . And the fire department actually, quote, tweeted it and said they had put out a thousand brush fires since the beginning of just this month. So I really want to remind people that you've got to talk to folks about how to prevent fires, make sure people aren't throwing cigaret butts out the window. They don't have chains dragging Lang and he said actually put out a great infographic about other things to look for, like driving your vehicle over brush can also ignite that brush. Broken bottles can can do a lot. So I just want to say this. This threat is very, very real and I appreciate the work of hesam and our fire department right now and appreciate the work of the mayor making sure this disaster declaration is effective. >> Thank you. Council member councilmember Kelly, then council member qadri. >> Thank you. I too want to say thank you to all the responsive public safety agencies involved in this. I know that it's not an easy lift. I worked as a single unit resource out of the bastrop county complex fires when those happened years ago, and it's wildfires. No joke. I mean, for those of you that were around

[3:23:26 PM]

those of you that were around then, that fire spread at a rate of a football field a minute. This is a serious issue, too. It is very important that you and your families, people in the public, the community are prepared and they know how where they go, bag is all the time. And so thank you very much for providing those go bags to council and for educating the community. I hope my colleagues will continue



to educate the community and thank you, mayor, for bringing forward this disaster declaration so that we can get ahead of whatever happens. If it's not a matter of if, but when. And so it's really important for that preparedness aspect. Thank you, everyone. >> Thank you, councilmember councilmember qadri. >> Thank you, mayor. I just want to thank the mayor for all his work on the on the declaration Ann and then he's on on all this great stuff. And I'm excited to put my acting to good use and get a get a video out on on pushing this out. I did have a question though on the on the marshaling yard. I had an opportunity this morning to go

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opportunity this morning to go to sunrise. And during that time we had marshaling yard came up and we discussed it. I think a few things that they kind of highlighted that they had seen or they I guess they know of that I, I guess like clarification or more insight. The first thing is that they mentioned that there's just a little sheet that separates, you know, men from, you know, you know, people who are coming in or men versus women. And I think there's going to be a section for folks from the lgbtq community. By that I assume they mainly meant you know, trans folks or who are coming in. Is there any long term is that a short term thing, the sheet? Are they going to put something a little bit, I don't know, stronger barrier up? And then the second thing that they had mentioned is that there was a I guess a project like the marshaling yard in the dfw area, and they had for armed security folks there. And this one is only going to have two unarmed folks. And they just brought up, you know, safety issues and concerns with that number. So I just wanted to get a little bit more insight on that. So council

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more insight on that. So council member for that level of detail, I'm going to have again Diana, Greg, come up to speak to that. Thank you. >> Thank you. Council member. The partition that you're referring to actually are temporary and so far as they were on hand with endeavors, but they determined that they felt like they were not large enough and sturdy enough. So they are replacing those and the space for lgbtqia is really by choice. So folks can elect to be in that space if they prefer. Otherwise they can be in the space with the gender that they identify. We discussed with endeavors the type of secured city they have in other locations used armed security. We've had concerns about that from the community about the welcoming nature of the space and that generally, if something serious is happening, we're likely to call our first responders in. So they are starting off unarmed. We believe that that is more in keeping

[3:26:31 PM]

that that is more in keeping with what we have heard from the community about what's desired. But certainly we are going to be monitoring safety on site as we move forward. >> Great. And then what is long term? I guess, barriers look like if it's not the sheets as well, they weren't sheets. >> They were partitions, but soft sided. And so I've not seen the replacement, but larger, sturdier, just I think a more less likely to fall over and creating a little more of a visual barrier. >> Great. >> Thank you. Thank you. >> Thank you. Councilmember councilmember vela, a quick question on the arch, for example, does not have armed security guards. And folks, I'm I hate to do this, but we posted for a resolution Ann and not that and not on homelessness and the marshaling yard. And I hate to cut off any council member, but I worry if we go too much further, we're outside of what we posted under stood. >> I'll withdraw the question and thank you very much.

[3:27:31 PM]

and thank you very much. >> Councilmember councilmember alter Allison alter. >> Thank you. Just a quick observation about the wildfire efforts. So thank you for all the staff and I will say that over the last few years that we've been talking about wildfire and really making it clear that it's not just the fire department's responsibility , are really proud of the way that staff have have really begun to step up and the way that even in our budget and different things we've seen our departments really own that this is the responsibility Katy of all the departments and they each have the role. The same is true for each individual in our community. If there's a wildfire , you have responsibilities. You have responsible parties to help us prevent it. There are actions that you can take to mitigate that. So I want to make sure that that we uplift that that it's really everyone, everyone's fight. I also want to recognize that we have something like 91,000, 92,000 homes in our community that are at risk for

[3:28:32 PM]

community that are at risk for wildfire and needing construction. And that will cost \$40 million. So it is really, really important that each of us, for our individual homes, especially if we're in the wildland urban interface, that we take the steps necessary to harden our homes. You know, there are things that you can do if you're getting a new roof there are things that you can do for your drains and your vents and other things that if you're in that area in particular, that will reduce the risk. And they don't. They don't only reduce the risk for your family, they reduce the risk for everyone around you. So please take that. That being said, there's more that we can do and I hope that through this process that this can be more of an exercise than a full blown in response effort . And in doing that, as we go through it, that we will learn things that we can do better, things where we need to make investments in the future, because the risks are very, very real. And while we've done more

[3:29:33 PM]

real. And while we've done more than most communities to prepare , the risk is also extremely high. And when there is a wildfire that's larger, we will be tested. And so we want to be ready when that test comes. So thank you. >> Thank you, councilmember members, I want to confirm with the city clerk's office that there are no speakers that have signed up for a communication. >> Correct. Mayor there are no speakers. All right. >> With that, that will take us to the resolution. You have the resolution, and I would recognize councilmember harper-madison moves to approve the resolution. It is seconded by councilmember Allison alter. Without objection, the resolution is adopted. Thank you all very much. Appreciate the council and appreciate our professional staff. And I think you sense that all of us really are grateful for the work that the professional staff is doing before we adjourn, I do want to remind those that will be

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remind those that will be watching, that are watching now or that they might be watching. We've said it a couple of times here on the dais. The mayor pro tem said it just a minute ago, but prevent the fire before it starts. In other words, properly dispose of your cigarets, dispose of oil and grease soaked rags. Don't park on dry grass. Use follow burn bands and don't use something that sparks all of those sorts of things. Second, sign up for emergency alerts. We need you to please sign up for emergency alerts. It's going to be one of the key ways that our fire department will notify you if you know, god forbid, you have to evacuate due to a wildfire for and that. So I'll ask you to go to warn central texas.org W a R N C E N T R a L T E X a S .org. And then finally have your go bag or

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finally have your go bag or emergency kits ready. As I indicated earlier, think of the five P's people, all pets prissie options, personal items and papers. If you need tips and you want to go to some place that will teach you about how to do this, please visit ready central Texas. Ready central Texas dot org and as some of the council members have pointed out you be be ready be ready. And the only way for you to be ready is if you have a go kit so that you can follow, so you can leave and you can follow the instructions that you will be given with that. Yes councilmember harper-madison, I'll be brief just from a digital literacy and access perspective, if all of our preventative methods and instructions are all online and there are folks who don't have

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there are folks who don't have access, I wonder if that's a conversation we can have with one of our committees moving forward, how we make certain that people who don't have digital access also have access to this information. >> So some of our community care workers, as you know, there's an organization that's a unionized block walking organization. Can we make an investment for them to do some block walking and do some door hangers that you really offer everybody equity and access around information for how to protect themselves? >> Good observation and we'll follow up. Thank you. Without objection, Ann. We are adjourned at 3:33 P.M. Thank you. Council members. Thank you to our staff.