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Changes in Con Fire fire prevention ordinance explained at council meeting

By Lou Fancher

Contra Costa County Assistant Fire Chief Chris Bachman at the Aug. 28 Lafayette City Council meeting addressed the most recent amendments to the California fire code and definitions related to exterior hazard abatement, defensible space, and rules governing the sale or transfer of property, during an update regarding Con Fire regulations.

Fire prevention measures impacting Lafayette residents arising from the county's required ordinance that is reviewed every three years, according to Bachman, includes an amendment removing section 321, which involves exterior fire hazard control, but lacked language about defensible space inspections and other specific details. Bachman said fire officials had been hearing from contractors that the ordinances across fire districts in Contra Costa County were inconsistent. As a result, fire officials along with department supervisors examined the ordinances line-by-line to make sure the language is consistent throughout the district jurisdictions.

Bachman said that Section 321 information about hazard definitions, control measures, and inspection standards were largely retained and still appear in updated form in the city's ordinance with added details about compliance, zoning, inspections, how to abate weeds, the requirements for creating and maintaining full wildfire breaks and more.

Among other notable updates in the ordinance are improvements made to Section 4, which refers to the sale or transfer of property and in the past has generated considerable questions from residents. Bachman said the fuel mitigation inspection requirements when selling or transferring property are state mandated and under Assembly Bill 38, only apply to properties in very high fire severity zones. Instead of calling out the specific "very high" inspection state statutes, Section 4 language remains general so that if the state changes the rules - for example, next year requiring inspections in low, moderate, or high fire severity zones - the section will still apply and not need to be modified.

Program updates include the initiation of the Wildfire Mitigation Program. Implemented countywide and funded by Measure X, a sales tax initiative, the program was approved by the county Board of Supervisors to provide \$2 million annually to do mitigation work. Bachman emphasized the initiative uses a community-driven approach and has neighborhoods, fire safety councils, and city staff propose programs to the local fire department. The fire department then grades the proposals, rating the ideas for importance within their communities, and he noted the county will eventually get to all of the proposals.

Examples of mitigation projects, Bachman said, are community chipping days, fire trail cleanup, removal of dead trees, evacuation route improvements, home hardening, low-income exterior hazard control funding, and more. He said 66 projects are currently in the queue and 39 have been completed.

Bachman recommended every resident should review their evacuation zone, subscribe to the Community Warning System to receive emergency messages from the county, and protect their home's defensible space by identifying vegetation hazards and making plans to mitigate them.

Questions from the council began with Council Member Susan Candell, who asked about enforcement and what the city might do. Bachman said an item like removal of dead trees had residents asking about permits for tree removal. "Make sure your city staff is aware of the program," he advised, adding Con Fire would work with staff to clarify how their efforts could be coordinated. Handbooks and flyers with all of the information and the ordinance he said are available to the public on the Con Fire website (cccfd.org).

Other questions from the council led Bachman to reiterate that the county is following Cal Fire standards, which means weed abatement applies countywide and although the defensible space maps are expected to be updated, inspection requirements currently apply only in very high fire severity zones. As to the inspections required during the sale of a property in one of those zones, Bachman said the district is able to get to them rapidly and in the event there is delay, there is language allowing homeowners to state they are aware of the inspections and wildfire mitigation actions necessary. The requirement will therefore not delay the sale of a property.

A question from a member of the public referred to cleanup abatement at the BART station. Bachman suggested requests or concerns about fire issues should be sent to info@cccfd.org. Checked every morning, the email messages are forwarded to the appropriate department and an email response will be sent outlining the next steps to expect.

Council Member Wei-Tai Kwok said educating the public was vital and coordinating with the county to "get the word out" is a high priority.

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