November 12, 2019

Dear Public Safety Committee Chair Taylor, Council President Kaplan and Councilmembers Bas and Gallo:

The Oakland Firesafe Council has long advocated for a more comprehensive approach to wildfire prevention here in Oakland and across the state. The devastating fires of 2017-2019 demonstrate that while wildfires may start on the ridges, they can spread quickly beyond the wildland urban interface (WUI) with devastating impacts to life, property and the local economy. Clearly, wildfire prevention is not just the fire department’s responsibility.

And so, we thoroughly support Councilmember’s Thao and Kalb’s resolution designating wildfire prevention a top priority for the city of Oakland and requesting the City Administrator to present a comprehensive report to the public safety committee that addresses Oakland’s wildfire prevention strategies and planning for Oakland’s wildland urban interface.

The resolution provides equity. There is no part of Oakland or its citizens and businesses that will not benefit from the strong fire prevention policy contained in the resolution. Furthermore the resolution pushes the “good of everyone” over the “good and profits of a few”, and should bring to an end even the possibility of “favoritism” with fire vegetation management inspections

We believe there are many ways that City Departments can, and should, think outside of the box when it comes to their involvement in wildfire prevention:

- The Planning Department should consider the impacts of granting permits that expand any industrial, commercial or institutional uses without first investigating that there are reliable systems for evacuating these uses for both the uses themselves and the surrounding neighborhood.
- Tree Services’ policies concerning tree removal need to be consistent with best practices concerning defensible space; tree permit fees should be reduced to encourage property owners within the WUI to remove trees that create a fire hazard because they are too close to structures or too close to each other.
- The City's Adopt-a-Spot program should incorporate wildfire prevention strategies into their policies and practices, especially as they pertain to defensible space and planting of less fire-prone plants.
- The Building Services Department and the Fire Department should consider requiring a defensible space and home hardening inspections prior to or at the time of the sale of properties located within the WUI. This is the perfect “teachable moment” for new homeowners to learn how to live responsibly in the high fire severity zones of Oakland.
- The Finance Department should investigate other ways to recoup expenses when
properties are abated for fire safety. Other cities—notably Walnut Creek—manage to put the expense on the property owner's next property tax bill, rather than placing a lien on the property that may not get paid until years down the road.

- The Transportation Department would be required to include in its planning and programs wildfire safety—evacuation routes, in particular.

We look forward to the City Administrator’s report in six months’ time, and hope to see more robust and comprehensive plans for wildfire prevention in the City's General Plan, Public Safety Plan, Hazard Mitigation Plan, the Fire Department's Strategic Plan and other long-term plans, policies and projects from throughout the City in the future.

Sincerely,

Susan Piper
Chair
Oakland Firesafe Council

cc: Mayor Libby Schaaf
    Councilmember Dan Kalb
    Councilmember Sheng Thao
    Councilmember Larry Reid
    City Administrator Sabrina Landreth
    Oakland Fire Chief Darin White