



Fire Safety Commission

CONSENT CALENDAR

December 6, 2005

To: Honorable Mayor and  
Members of the City Council

From: Fire Safety Commission

Submitted by: Trudy Washburn, Commission Chair, Fire Safety Commission

Subject: Fire Safety Commission Report and Priorities for 2006

RECOMMENDATION

Direct the City Manager to: 1) expedite completion of Fire Station No. 7; 2) limit or prohibit on-street parking as necessary to maintain unimpeded access for emergency vehicles; 3) expand the neighborhood emergency cache program; 4) fund \$100,000 for path improvements in the hills for emergency egress; 5) maintain and expand informational outreach on fire safety to homeowners in the critical fire area of the Berkeley Hills and mail fire safety information to each new resident in the Berkeley Hills as homes change hands; 6) maintain and promote the present green can and chipper programs; and 7) review and modify the Fire Department's list of fire-suppression gear that can be purchased through the City by homeowners, specifically considering the sale of 2-1/2" to 1" fire hose adapters to persons who have completed fire suppression training.

SUMMARY

The purpose of the Fire Safety Commission is to assist the City in dealing with risks of a major conflagration in the critical fire area of the Berkeley Hills. The recommendations address these topics, all of which are priorities for the Fire Safety Commission:

1. Completion of Fire Station No. 7.
2. On-street parking that obstructs emergency vehicles.
3. Emergency equipment and supply cache program.
4. Improving paths for emergency egress.
5. Dissemination of fire safety information to hills residents.
6. "Green can" and chipper programs.
7. Sale of fire suppression equipment by the City.

### FISCAL IMPACT

1. Completion of Fire Station No. 7: No significant impact anticipated; the contractor is already obligated to perform.
2. On-Street Parking that Obstructs Emergency Vehicles: Minimal cost for "no parking" signs and red paint on the curbs.
3. Emergency Equipment and Supply Cache Program: Moderate relative to potential benefit; cost of emergency caches already delivered is about \$13,000 each.
4. Improving Paths for Emergency Egress: \$100,000 would add concrete steps and galvanized pipe handrails to one or more of the paths.
5. Dissemination of Fire Safety Information to Hills Residents: Minimal; outreach materials have been prepared and mailed with funds obtained from a FEMA grant. Additional copies can be printed and mailed at some cost for printing and postage.
6. Green Can and Chipper Programs: No change in current funding requirement.
7. Sale of Fire Suppression Equipment by the City: None.

### CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

#### *Completion of Fire Station No. 7*

Groundbreaking for Fire Station No. 7 took place in late 2004. Completion is expected sometime between February and April 2006. Progress toward completion of this urgently needed facility is proceeding very slowly.

#### *On-Street Parking that Obstructs Emergency Vehicles*

At many places in the Berkeley hills, residents and visitors park their cars legally, but in such a way as to make the streets impassable for large emergency vehicles such as fire engines. These streets are also difficult for smaller vehicles to navigate quickly.

#### *Emergency Equipment and Supply Cache Program*

Each Council district has one cache of emergency supplies. The area that will be served by each cache during an emergency will be concentrated, and largely confined, to the area immediately around that cache.

#### *Improving Paths for Emergency Egress*

Pathways will play an important role in emergency egress in a disaster. Many of our paths have become overgrown and difficult to navigate.

#### *Dissemination of Fire Safety Information to Hills Residents*

A packet of fire safety information was prepared and mailed to each of the 8,300 parcels in the Hazardous Hills Area this summer. Feedback has been very positive.

#### *Green Can and Chipper Programs*

The current green can and chipper programs are effective and popular, and need to be promoted and maintained.

*Sale of Fire Suppression Equipment by the City*

Currently only fire personnel are allowed to hook up fire hoses to fire hydrants. With the proper equipment and fire suppression training, residents would be able to help in the event of an emergency.

**BACKGROUND***Completion of Fire Station No. 7*

Existing Fire Station No. 7 is too small, seismically unsafe and poorly located to respond in a disaster that causes landslides and blocks roads. Construction of the new, larger and well located station is behind schedule.

*On-Street Parking that Obstructs Emergency Vehicles*

In most of the hill areas of Berkeley, parking on both sides of the street is legal. Many households own several vehicles and many homeowners have put their garages to alternate uses. The result is a proliferation of vehicles parked on streets, even where those streets are narrow and winding. There are many streets in the hills where there should be no on-street parking or where parking should be restricted to one side only.

*Emergency Equipment and Supply Cache Program*

The Fire Department has installed just one cache of emergency equipment and supplies in each of the Council districts. Locations within the Council Districts were selected based upon the perceived distribution of risk and the state of organization of the neighborhoods where caches were located. The area that will be served by each cache during an emergency will be concentrated, and largely confined, to the area immediately around that cache. Geographically, most of Berkeley will derive no benefit from the existing caches during an emergency.

*Improving Paths for Emergency Egress*

A FEMA grant allowed many hillside paths to become more useable by residents of the hills. These paths have been in existence for many years but many have become overgrown and difficult to navigate. In the past, Boy Scouts, while earning their Eagle Scout rank, donated their services to improve the paths by putting in steps made of railroad ties.

*Dissemination of Fire Safety Information to Hills Residents*

The Fire Safety Commission participated actively in the application of a FEMA grant for improved fire preparedness in the hill areas of Berkeley. As a first order of business, the Commission recommended that the BFD not hire an expensive consultant to develop an approach to educational outreach. Instead, the Commission suggested using some free labor of Commissioners. That recommendation was accepted.

As a preliminary step, Commissioners Tim Wallace and Matt Mitchell facilitated two focus groups of hill residents and two on-the-ground inspection tours to determine knowledge and attitudes about fire safety. It became apparent that most homeowners have, at best, incomplete knowledge of their fire risks and the steps they can take to reduce those risks. Based upon the information obtained, a variety of outreach materials (a video, DVD, refrigerator magnet,

handout literature and a complaint hot line) were proposed and considered. The ultimate result was a mailing that included newly created literature and a refrigerator magnet.

#### *Green Can and Chipper Programs*

Since the 1991 firestorm, Berkeley has provided "green can" containers for weeds and cuttings of homeowners in the critical fire area. Free chipper service has also been offered twice a year to permit homeowners to dispose of stems and branches too large to fit into the green cans. Based upon focus group interviews with residents of the critical fire area, these programs are very effective and very popular.

#### *Sale of Fire Suppression Equipment by the City*

After the 1991 fire storm, the City offered to sell (at cost) pieces of equipment that the City could purchase at advantageous prices. Included in that inventory was 1" fabric fire hose. The 1" fire hose offered no substantial advantage over a garden hose when connected to a modern water supply system that includes a pressure regulator. However, if the 1" hose could be connected to a fire hydrant with an adapter, it could be very effective in suppressing fire in its early stages before the Fire Department could arrive.

### RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

#### *Completion of Fire Station No. 7*

This is critical and is the Commission's number one priority. Rapid response to small fires in both wildland areas and hillside houses is imperative to prevent development into an out-of-control conflagration, particularly during high fire season conditions. The slow progress toward completion of this new, urgently needed, station is unacceptable.

#### *On-Street Parking that Obstructs Emergency Vehicles*

In an emergency, first responders (police, ambulances and fire equipment) will need to be able to move swiftly through the streets in the hills. As vehicles parked on City streets have proliferated, and as the proportions of large vehicles (trucks and SUVs) have increased, access has been constricted, and at times completely blocked. The problem can be alleviated by limiting parking to one side of narrow streets and prohibiting parking completely on the narrowest streets and on corners where the effect is to limit access. The program has been popular in neighborhoods where it has been pursued.

#### *Emergency Equipment and Supply Cache Program*

Many emergencies, including wildfire as well as earthquakes and terrorist activity, will require citizen participation in the response efforts. The uniformed first responders are too few and their equipment too limited to deal with a major disaster. Well-prepared and well-equipped citizens can provide invaluable assistance in major emergencies. Currently, there are significant numbers of citizens who have taken CERT courses but who do not have access to the emergency equipment and supplies they need to fully exploit their training in an emergency.

*Improving Paths for Emergency Egress*

In cases where evacuation by automobile has been blocked by a landslide or fire these paths provide more direct routes for evacuation on foot. Many of the paths need further improvement such as installation of steps on steep sections and removal of overgrowth by trees and bushes.

*Dissemination of Fire Safety Information to Hills Residents*

The recently-completed mailing to all homeowners in the critical fire area will help to educate current residents. However, Berkeley homes are constantly changing hands. The City is aware, through transfer tax records, of these changes of ownership. New owners should be provided with the same or similar outreach materials to make them aware of hazards that they can and should take steps to mitigate. Relatively simple and inexpensive efforts by homeowners can drastically reduce the risk of another fire storm in the hills.

*Green Can and Chipper Programs*

Overgrown vegetation is a primary source of fuel for wildfire. The green can and chipper programs make it inexpensive and convenient to control the buildup of vegetable fuel in homeowners' yards. That reduces the risk of another fire storm.

*Sale of Fire Suppression Equipment by the City*

At this time, Berkeley does not allow residents to hook up fire hoses to fire hydrants. However, in the event of an emergency that overwhelmed the Fire Department, the only recourse for most hill area residents would be their own hoses. A 1" hose can be handled safely by non-professional firefighters even with full hydrant pressure. With proper training, the hydrant can be used safely, without damaging the water system. The key to effective use of the 1" hose is an adapter that permits it to be hooked up to a hydrant.

CITY MANAGER

The City Manager refers these recommendations to the budget process.

CONTACT PERSON

Debra Pryor, Fire Chief, Fire Department, 510-981-5500