



July 18, 2019

The Honorable Judge Kelly V. Simmons  
Marin County Superior Court  
P.O. Box 4988  
San Rafael, CA 94913-4988

Pat Randolph, Foreperson  
Marin County Civil Grand Jury  
3501 Civic Center Drive, Room 275  
San Rafael, CA 94903

Re: Grand Jury Report: *Wildfire Preparedness: A New Approach*

Dear Judge Simmons and Foreperson Randolph:

The City of Mill Valley has reviewed your progress report on “Wildfire Preparedness: A New Approach”. The report calls for a response from the City of Mill Valley to all but two of the recommendations. Further, addressing the challenge of wildfire preparedness is a countywide task, and in the spirit of collaboration, Mill Valley representatives have joined representatives from all of Marin’s affected agencies to prepare a comprehensive response. Where appropriate, the City has elected to also answer several questions from an individual perspective in addition to a regional one. The following letter responds to your specific requests to Recommendation R1 to R15 as contained in the Report:

#### **RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Marin County Civil Grand Jury recommends the following:

**R1. Create a comprehensive, countywide vegetation management plan that includes vegetation along evacuation routes, a campaign to mobilize public participation, and low-income subsidies.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

The Marin cities, towns, fire agencies and the County are addressing this recommendation with a working group to explore the creation of a countywide wildfire prevention program governed by a countywide joint power authority. We agree that more needs to be done to address this critical public safety issue in the face of what now is commonly referred to as the “new-normal.” Accelerating climate change has led to larger, costlier, and more frequent wildfires in the state than ever before, burning almost year-round. Because of this, all fire agencies, the County, and its cities and towns are working together to explore the creation a countywide wildfire prevention program.

The program scope for an ongoing, locally-controlled, countywide wildfire prevention program would include the following:

- Fire fuel reduction and vegetation management
- Defensible-space home evaluations and education
- Evacuation planning and neighborhood preparedness
- Alert and warning enhancements
- Pursuit of grant funds for countywide efforts, as well as grant funding to assist seniors, the financially disadvantaged and those with access and functional needs with preparedness measures.

This program would require new ongoing funding. We are currently exploring a potential countywide parcel tax measure in March 2020.

A key issue developed and prioritized by the Mill Valley City Council includes community emergency preparedness with a focus on fire, flood and earthquake. We have had this policy commitment and active prevention programs in Mill Valley for more than 20 years. To this end, we have developed a comprehensive vegetation management program that includes:

- Reduction of fuels along primary and secondary evacuation routes.
- Removal of hazardous trees throughout our fire prone areas.
- Maintenance of City owned properties located in the wildland urban interface

To accomplish the vegetation management program, the City Council has allocated one million Municipal Services Tax (MST) dollars for FY 2018/20.

**R2. Hire at least 30 new civilian vegetation inspectors and at least eight fire/fuels crews focused on fuel reduction in the high-risk areas of the county, including federal, state and local public lands.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

As stated in our response to Recommendation No. 1, a countywide wildfire prevention initiative would include expanded defensible-space home inspections and education. A working group of fire chiefs and city/town managers are exploring options to ensure the most appropriate and cost-effective solutions are considered to improve defensible space countywide. This enhanced program would require new, ongoing resources. The staffing of this effort would be subject to policy decisions of a countywide JPA and/or the governing board of responsible fire agencies.

Currently, the City of Mill Valley conducts residential fire safety inspections (weed abatements) on an annual basis. This task is completed by way of engine company inspections starting in May and generally concluding in August. For FY 2019/20 the City Council has allocated funding for additional staff hours to assist with the inspection of approximately 5000 parcels. The supplementary funding was made possible through the Municipal Services Tax which focuses on fuel reduction and paved road maintenance.

**R3. Develop and implement a fast, streamlined procedure to enforce vegetation citations.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

Fire prevention officers throughout the county are working on a countywide, streamlined approach to updating codes and processes. It is the intention of the group to implement some items as part of regular Fire Code adoption cycle this fall. Larger scale collaboration and a more streamlined approach will be addressed as part of the countywide wildfire prevention program. At the countywide level, our intention is to educate homeowners for cooperative compliance. Addressing non-compliance would be a matter for each jurisdiction to address.

The City of Mill Valley has a matured approach to enforcement of vegetation violation which includes citations and abatement. Although it remains rare and is not the goal of gaining compliance, we have taken several cases through the citation process to achieve abatement. The abatement process follows a typical pattern of:

- Initial Inspection with an out of compliance finding
- 14 Day notice for compliance
- 7 Day additional notice for compliance
- Compliance process with escalating fines
- Abatement

The best results for compliance come by way of resident education, assistance and guidance.

**R4. Adopt and deliver a comprehensive education program focused on action for all residents of Marin on a regular schedule by a team of expert trainers.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

A countywide wildfire prevention program would include a comprehensive education program for all residents. Although agencies have made efforts to educate the public, without additional resources to enhance existing efforts, we believe these efforts will continue to be insufficient and not consistent throughout the County.

The City of Mill Valley strongly agrees with the need and value of education. To this end, we conduct a substantial amount of community outreach, education and training. The City Council is so dedicated to this value, we have established (2001) and appointed the Mill Valley Emergency Preparedness Commission (EPC) to assist and enable positive culture of preparedness within our community. Our belief is that comprehensive education bridges the gap in and moves residents to be action oriented within the City and at the neighborhood level. The results of education are increased Firewise Communities (10), Living with Fire programs (2), vegetation management workshops (1), CERT (2) Get Ready 5<sup>th</sup> Grade (all elementary schools), Get Ready courses (2) and 15 years of community evacuation drills.

**R5. Promote the creation of Firewise Communities in every neighborhood by all local jurisdictions.**

**This recommendation has already been implemented.**

As the Grand Jury report points out, Marin currently has over 30 Firewise neighborhoods. With

the creation of a countywide wildfire prevention program, our current efforts can be substantially enhanced and expanded throughout the County.

Within the City of Mill Valley, we have been an early adopter of creating Firewise communities. Of the 30 distinct communities within Marin County that have achieved Firewise certification, ten exist within the City of Mill Valley. This is a number that we see growing over time as additional residents partner with the Fire Department and other neighbors to form certified Firewise communities.

**R6. Employ individuals with skills in public speaking, teaching, curriculum design, graphics, web design, advertising, community organization, community relations, and diplomacy to educate the public.**

**This recommendation has already been implemented**

We currently have very articulate fire professionals and FIRESafe Marin educating the public. However, we recognize more needs to be done and this work may not need to be done by our firefighters, who often have competing response priorities.

Within the City of Mill Valley, we have experience staff skilled at the art of communication in most every format. The City has a mature multimodal approach to communications most recently exemplified by our recent outreach effort that included:

- 5,000 postcards for our March Community Meeting
- Website, Twitter, Facebook and Next Door postings that support numerous outreach events such as community meetings, workshops and other neighborhood events.
- 5,000 info trifold/brochures regarding fire safety workshops and City Council meetings.

**R7. Collect Marin residents' information and add it to Alert Marin and Nixle databases to make them opt-out systems.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

This recommendation would require changes in State law. We will work with legislators to support bills like SB 46 (Hueso; 2019), which would allow local governments to enter into agreements to access resident cell phone contact information for enrolling county residents in a county-operated public emergency warning system. We are also pursuing newly available authority to cooperate with utility companies to obtain customer data for these purposes, but state legislation would be needed to obtain cell phone contact information.

The City of Mill Valley agrees that residents should be automatically added to emergency notification systems. Creating an opt-out approach is beyond the scope of this City, however a significant effort is currently underway to add the contact information to our alerting systems. At all public facing fire events (CERT, Living with Fire and Get Ready classes), sign-ups for emergency notifications are encouraged and facilitated by the EPC and FD staff. Included in a

majority of our print and digital outreach products identify and encourage all residents to sign up for themselves and their families.

**R8. Expand the use of sirens with LRADs.**

**This recommendation has already been implemented.**

As an outdoor alerting system, LRAD can operate as a siren to improve the public's situational awareness, as well as provide real time instructions (separate from the cellular network which can often fail/overload during emergency) that can enhance community evacuation. Under certain conditions, the system may have limited reach and limited ability to be heard, however, acts as an additional alerting redundancy. As with any system there are limitations, however our local testing provided positive results based on topography and other outdoor existing noises such as wind. This type of system does have valuable application in some areas within the County. For those communities for which these logistical challenges can be overcome, there is considerable appeal for technology such as LRADs, which carry a more specific message than sirens. To be effective, sirens require communitywide understanding of their meaning and what is expected of residents when they are sounded.

Recently, the City of Mill Valley completed the installation of five LRAD speakers strategically located throughout our high fire danger areas. The technology advancement offers additional redundancy for effectively communication to the public with real time actionable information. The system uses satellite connectivity and battery backup to enhance resiliency of the system.

**R9. Research, develop, and publish plans for the mass movement of populations along designated evacuation routes.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

Large scale evacuation planning needs to identify which corridors would benefit the most from contra-flow and traffic-light sequencing. The use of experts in this field should be engaged. Coordination with public works agencies and additional funding from a countywide wildfire prevention initiative will be a critical component to our success.

The City of Mill Valley is actively developing processes and methods that enhance local abilities to move populations out of harms way. We have identified primary and secondary evacuation routes located within our developed structure defense zones along with locating several Community Refuge Area options that enable an effective and efficient evacuation. Mass movements of populations occur best with mature plans, nimble emergency managers and an informed/trained population. To this end, we have conducted 15 years of evacuation drills in one form or another.

**R10. Give the highest priority to mitigating known choke points and to maximizing the capacity of existing evacuation routes.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

Large scale evacuation planning needs to identify “choke points”. The use of traffic analysis experts in this field should be engaged. Coordination with public works agencies and additional funding from a countywide wildfire prevention initiative will be a critical component to our success.

The City of Mill Valley has identified approximately 14 locations within our community that with engineering/construction enhancements would improve evacuation of residents and emergency response. To this end, we have several access projects in various stages of development and neighborhood conversation with 2 projects recently completed and two additional projects moving towards construction. These access and circulation enhancement projects are funded through the Mill Valley Municipal Services Tax.

**R11. Incorporate and prioritize plans for mass evacuations in all pending and future traffic/road projects along major escape routes.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

Consideration of mass evacuations is an important element for agencies to add to their assessment of road-related capital projects. However, prioritizing evacuation plans above all other considerations may lead to design decisions that impair other important considerations, such as safe use of roads on a daily basis. A balanced lifestyle of each project is required.

**R12. Educate, prepare, and drill for evacuations in all communities.**

**This recommendation has been implemented.**

The City of Mill Valley places a high value on educating, preparing and drilling the community. We have been conducting community evacuation drills in one form or another for over 15 years. The drills are often coupled with a video and handout materials to inform all residents who are not able to participate. The drills are enriched through partnerships with allied agencies, and neighboring communities such as the Southern Marin Fire Protection District, Marin County Fire, Marin County Sheriff's Office, Cal FIRE, California Highway Patrol, Red Cross, Marin Humane Society and Pacific Gas and Electric.

**R13. Fully integrate public transit into the MERA communications system without further delay.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

The member agencies of MERA welcome the addition of transit agencies serving Marin. It will be necessary to analyze how to integrate these agencies in a manner that is fair and equitable.

**R15. Establish in the form of a Joint Powers Authority an umbrella organization for wildfire planning and preparedness (vegetation management, public education, alerts, and**

**evacuation), funded by a 1/4 cent sales tax.**

**This recommendation requires further analysis.**

The Marin cities, towns, fire agencies and County are addressing this recommendation with a working group to explore the creation of a countywide wildfire prevention program governed by a countywide joint power authority. The program scope for ongoing, locally-controlled, countywide wildfire prevention program would include the following:

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- Alert and warning enhancements
- Pursuit of grant funds for countywide efforts, as well as grant funding to assist seniors, financially disadvantaged and those with access and functional needs with preparedness measures.
- This program would require new, ongoing funding. We are currently exploring a potential countywide parcel tax measure in March 2020. Based on our feedback from Marin fire- responsible agencies, we believe that a parcel tax is the appropriate funding mechanism.

In addition, we believe the Grand Jury's recommendation may have been based on their assumption that "each jurisdiction would have to pass exactly the same parcel tax measure for the same amount at the same time." It is worth noting that, based on the support of agencies that are responsible for fire suppression; it is allowable for the Board of Supervisors to place a single, countywide parcel tax measure on the ballot. A recent example is Measure A on the November 4, 2014 countywide ballot, which implemented a countywide parcel tax for the Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA). Therefore, the results of a countywide measure would require a two-thirds support countywide but would not require two-thirds support in each jurisdiction.

The Mill Valley City Council strongly agrees with and appreciates the focus placed on this important subject. We are supportive of the Grand Jury process and remain determined to identify opportunities that work in collaboration with our community and amongst our neighboring/allied agencies.

Sincerely,



James Wickham  
Mayor  
City of Mill Valley

Cc: Mill Valley City Council  
City Manager  
File