



THE CITY OF  
**NOVATO**  
CALIFORNIA

922 Machin Avenue  
Novato, CA 94945  
415/899-8900  
FAX 415/899-8213  
[www.novato.org](http://www.novato.org)

Mayor  
Eric Lucan  
Mayor Pro Tem  
Denise Athas  
Councilmembers  
Pam Drew  
Pat Eklund  
Josh Fryday  
City Manager  
Regan M. Candelario

June 26, 2019

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

**RE: Response to Grand Jury Report "Wildfire Preparedness: A New Approach"**

Dear Mr. Randolph,

At its regular meeting on June 25, 2019, the Novato City Council reviewed the above report which requests the City Council to respond to Recommendations R1, R3-13 and R15.

The City Council's response to each recommendation is attached. If the members of the Grand Jury require additional information, please contact City Manager Regan M. Candelario at 415.899.8900 or [rc@novato.org](mailto:rc@novato.org).

We appreciate the work of the Grand Jury and thank you for your service to our residents and the Marin County community.

Sincerely,

Eric Lucan  
Mayor

Attachments (1)

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



## **City of Novato response to Grand Jury report “Wildfire Preparedness: A New Approach”**

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

**Response:** 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 of a countywide wildfire prevention program.

The program scope for an ongoing, locally-controlled, countywide wildfire prevention program could include, but not be limited to, 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 for to assist seniors, financially disadvantaged and those with access and functional needs with preparedness measures.

This program would require new ongoing funding. The County of Marin is currently exploring a potential countywide parcel tax measure in March 2020.

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

**Response:** This recommendation requires further analysis. Fire prevention officers throughout the county are working on a countywide, streamlined approach updating codes and processes. It is the intention of the group to implement some items as part of regular 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, the intention is to educate homeowners for cooperative compliance. Addressing non-compliance would be a matter for each jurisdiction to address.

The City of Novato Code Enforcement Department does not proactively enforce or issue citations for vegetation management violations. Although citations are rarely issued, some are issued on a complaint from a community member or when a serious public nuisance is identified. Violations can be brought before the City Zoning, Housing, and Code Enforcement

Board. The board has the ability to issues a citation and follow through with obtaining a court order if the property owner does not address the violation.

The Novato Fire Protection District enforces most vegetation violations in the City of Novato based on referrals or complaints from the community. Their intent is to educate the public and gain compliance in a cooperative nature. Citations are a last resort. The Novato Fire Protection District is hiring two fulltime Wildfire Mitigation Specialists in the next couple months. The primary function for the Wildfire Mitigation Specialists will be to conduct inspections in wildland interface areas and educate homeowners regarding the importance of clearing vegetation from around the home and considering fire resistant building materials.

**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.**

**Response: 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.

Since 2006, The City of Novato and the Novato Fire Protection District have collaborated via MOU to host a joint Emergency Operations Center. A strong working relationship evolved and the City of Novato Police Department and Novato Fire Protection District now work together to provide Emergency Management Services for Novato residents. These services include activation of the Emergency Operations Center, regular training and table top exercise associated with the Emergency Operations Center, earthquake and wildfire response protocols, evacuation planning and community drills, Public Safety Power Shutoff plans, and numerous community outreach efforts. Training includes preparing employees in emergency response, but also in personal preparedness so they are better prepared to return to work during emergencies.

The City of Novato actively promotes the *Get Ready Marin* program, a program presented by police department volunteer Terry Fischer. In 2018, the following *Get Ready Marin* presentations were held:

5 Public/Community Classes	147 Attendance
<u>4 Neighborhood/HOA Classes</u>	<u>245 Attendance</u>
9 Total Classes	392 Total Attendance

During the third quarter of 2019, the City of Novato plans to present the Get Ready Marin program in Spanish to better service our Latino community.

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

**Response: 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. In Novato, there are seven Firewise Communities, with four additional applications pending. The Firewise Communities program is managed by the Novato Fire Protection District with the support of the City of Novato.

**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.**

**Response: This recommendation has already been implemented.** The City of Novato works to select subject matter experts to represent the organization and most effectively deliver messaging to the community regarding the importance of emergency preparedness and the need to be ready in case of a disaster. Additionally, the City of Novato uses the services of an emergency preparedness consultant. The consultant, Dave Jeffries, is a prior police department employee who has a vast area of expertise in emergency preparedness, disaster response, and community messaging. His training and presentation skills are excellent. Feedback gathered after presentations and internal training consistently show the messaging is well received and valuable in preparing employees and the community for the next emergency.

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

**Response: This recommendation requires further analysis.** This recommendation would require changes in State law to 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 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.

In the absence of new legislation, the City of Novato and the Novato Fire Protection District regularly promote the importance of emergency preparedness and encourages the public to sign up for Alert Marin and Nixle as a means to receive emergency notifications. Alert Marin and Nixle information is distributed at all special events to encourage people to opt-in. Whenever possible, a portable computer is used to encourage the public to sign up on the spot. The public is able to sign up for Nixle on the City of Novato and Novato Police Department websites.

In February of 2019, the Novato Police Department was notified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) that they had been approved to implement the use of the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). IPAWS is an internet-based capability that federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities can use to issue critical public alerts and warnings. Being an authorized IPAWS users will allow the Novato Police Department to send critical emergency alerts via the Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA). These alerts would be sent to all cellular phone users in a geographic area and has a much greater reach than Nixle or Alert Marin.

In order to ensure consistent messaging, any WEA alert would be coordinated with the Marin County Office of Emergency Services (OES) whenever possible. The Novato Police Department will be the only municipal law enforcement agency in Marin County with access to WEA. The intent is to create redundancy and a back up to Marin OES. Examples of potential uses of the WEA system include emergency evacuation notifications for a fast approaching wildland fire or chemical release from a treatment plant.

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

**Response: This recommendation requires further analysis for some, but overall the City of Novato does not agree.** Sirens and LRAD's have limited reach and ability to be heard inside a building. Local testing has provided mixed results based on topography and other competing outdoor existing noise. 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 LRAD's, 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.

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

**Response: 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 Novato, in conjunction with the Novato Fire Protection District, has evacuation plans in place which must be flexible based on the circumstances at the time of a critical incident. As conditions change in real time during an incident, routes and plans change to keep evacuees out of harm's way. While evacuation route planning is essential, current information on environmental conditions during an incident will ultimately determine safe routes and safe locations for staging evacuees.

The City of Novato and Novato Fire Protection District are in the final stages of developing neighborhood-by-neighborhood maps that will be distributed to the public with potential evacuation routes and locations of designated temporary refuge areas. The maps will be distributed to the respective neighborhoods and follow-up community meetings will be considered to reinforce the messaging.

On May 18, 2019, the Novato Police Department, Novato Fire Protection District, and cooperating agencies including the Marin County Sheriff's Office, California Highway Patrol and Marin Open Space District conducted evacuation drills of the Bahia/ Green Point, Wild Horse Valley, and Novato Oaks neighborhoods. Prior to the evacuation drill, outreach was conducted to the respective neighborhoods and residents were asked to prepare for the evacuation and encouraged to sign up Nixle and Alert Marin.

For each neighborhood being evacuated, residents received an Alert Marin notification directing them to evacuate to the Margaret Todd Community Center. At the Community Center, they participated in an education event promoting fire safety, disaster preparedness, and the importance of signing up for Nixle and Alert Marin. County of Marin Offices of Emergency Services personnel were on hand to facilitate signing up for the alerting programs. These neighborhood evacuation drills are held annually and have received positive feedback from residents and public safety responders. Lessons learned during the evacuation drills are incorporated in future plans to enhance our response abilities.

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

**Response: 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.

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

**Response: 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.

The City of Novato Public Works Department and Novato Fire Protection District work together closely on all traffic/road project along major evacuation routes. The intent is to ensure effective design of road projects and increase the traffic capacity whenever possible to allow increase flow of traffic during evacuations. This is being considered in expansion plans for the Novato Blvd. and Diablo Blvd. area.

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

**Response: This recommendation has been implemented.** Although all Marin Fire agencies have done this work to some extent, a countywide wildfire prevention program would substantially expand efforts to educate, prepare and drill for evacuations through Marin.

The City of Novato, in conjunction with the Novato Fire Protection District, has evacuation plans in place which must be flexible based on the circumstances at the time of a critical incident. As conditions change in real time during an incident, routes and plans change to keep evacuees out of harm’s way. While evacuation route planning is essential, current information on environmental conditions during an incident will ultimately determine safe routes and safe locations for staging evacuees.

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

**Response: This recommendation requires further analysis.** 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 ¼ cent sales tax.**

**Response: 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 joints power authority. The program scope for ongoing, locally-controlled, countywide wildfire prevention program could include the following:

- Fire fuel reduction and vegetation management
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- Evacuation planning and neighborhood preparedness
- 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. The County of Marin is 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.

