



City Council Memorandum

City of Arts & Innovation

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL DATE: APRIL 8, 2025

FROM: FIRE DEPARTMENT WARDS: ALL

SUBJECT: URGENCY ORDINANCE AMENDING CHAPTER 6 OF THE RIVERSIDE MUNICIPAL CODE BY ADDING CHAPTER 6.16 REGARDING VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND DEFENSIBLE SPACE AS AN EMERGENCY MEASURE TO PRESERVE THE PUBLIC PEACE, HEALTH, AND SAFETY

ISSUE:

Adopt the proposed Urgency Ordinance relating to vegetation management and defensible space by amending Chapter 6 of the Riverside Municipal Code by adding Chapter 6.16.

This is an emergency matter as defined in Section 413 of the City Charter necessary to preserve public peace, health, and safety based on the subsequent events and circumstances.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the City Council:

1. Receive a report regarding an Urgency Ordinance adopting vegetation management and defensible space regulations in compliance with Government Code Section 51175; and
2. With at least five affirmative votes, adopt the Urgency Ordinance amending the Riverside Municipal Code by adding Chapter 6.16 regarding vegetation management and defensible space.

BACKGROUND:

California Government Code Section 51175 establishes the state's commitment to mitigating wildfire risks through the designation of Fire Hazard Severity Zones (FHSZ) in areas of significant fire threat. Wildfires are extremely costly, not only to property owners and residents, but also to local agencies, posing a serious threat to public peace, health, and safety. The wildfire front is not the only risk—embers, or firebrands, can travel far beyond the main fire area, igniting structures or vegetation long after the flames have passed. Because wildfires do not adhere to jurisdictional boundaries, effective prevention and suppression efforts require coordination among cities, counties, special districts, and state and federal agencies.

The purpose of Government Code 51175 is to assist in fire prevention planning, requiring local governments and property owners to implement wildfire mitigation strategies. These include defensible space requirements (as outlined in PRC 4291), fire-resistant construction codes, and vegetation management mandates. By identifying high-risk zones, the state ensures that

appropriate fire safety standards and land use policies are applied to reduce the likelihood of catastrophic wildfires. By enforcing these regulations and promoting collaboration among agencies, California aims to minimize the devastation caused by wildfires, ensuring the long-term protection of both communities and natural resources.

Wildfires in California have become increasingly severe due to a combination of climate change, prolonged droughts, excessive vegetation buildup from decades of fire suppression, and expanding development in fire-prone areas. The state's dry, hot conditions create ideal wildfire fuel, and growing populations in the wildland-urban interface put more homes and lives at risk. In 2024, California experienced 8,024 wildfires, burning approximately 1,050,012 acres, destroying 1,716 structures, and causing one fatality—the highest acreage burned since 2021. These fires have devastating human, economic, and environmental impacts, emphasizing the need for improved land management, fire-resistant development, and climate adaptation strategies.

In January 2025, Los Angeles County experienced catastrophic wildfires, notably the Palisades and Eaton fires, which collectively burned over 57,000 acres and led to the destruction or damage of more than 18,000 structures. These fires resulted in at least 29 fatalities and prompted the evacuation of over 200,000 residents. The financial impact was profound, with insured losses estimated to exceed \$28 billion, marking it as one of the costliest wildfire events in U.S. history.

DISCUSSION:

Defensible space is a critical factor in reducing the likelihood of a home burning during a wildfire. This concept involves creating a buffer zone around structures by removing flammable vegetation, reducing fuel loads, and implementing fire-resistant landscaping to slow the spread of flames. Studies have shown that homes with well-maintained defensible space are significantly more likely to survive a wildfire event. By strategically clearing dead vegetation, trimming trees, and maintaining a safe distance between structures and combustible materials, defensible space reduces fire intensity and provides firefighters with a safer, more effective area to defend properties. Research from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and Cal Fire has demonstrated that homes with at least 100 feet of defensible space have a much higher survival rate compared to those with little or no fire mitigation efforts. In areas like California's wildland-urban interface (WUI), where wildfires are increasingly destructive, defensible space is a proven method to improve community resilience and prevent catastrophic property loss.

The proposed City of Riverside Defensible Space Ordinance establishes a proactive approach to wildfire risk reduction by mandating vegetation management and defensible space requirements for properties within High and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (FHSZ). As wildfire threats continue to escalate due to climate change, prolonged droughts, and increased development in fire-prone areas, this ordinance is a critical measure to protect lives, property, and infrastructure from the devastating effects of wildfires.

Key Provisions of the Proposed Ordinance (Exhibit A):

- Annual Defensible Space Requirements
 - Property owners in designated hazard zones must maintain 100 feet of defensible space around structures.
 - Flammable vegetation, overgrown brush, and combustible materials must be removed.

- Fire-resistant landscaping and proper spacing of vegetation must be maintained to prevent fire spread.
- Good Neighbor Rule
 - Owners of unimproved parcels adjacent to improved properties must also comply with defensible space requirements.
 - Requires maintaining 100 feet of clearance around structures, extending onto adjacent properties as needed.
 - Ensures that vegetation management efforts are coordinated across property lines to prevent fire hazards.
- Inspection and Enforcement Procedures
 - Initial Inspections: Conducted 30 days after Annual Defensible Space Clearance Notices are issued.
 - Non-Compliance Citations: Property owners who fail to comply will receive an Official Inspection Report detailing violations and required corrective actions.
 - Administrative Citations and Fines: Persistent non-compliance may result in fines, additional inspections, and forced abatement at the property owner's expense.
 - Nuisance Abatement: If violations are not addressed, the City may hire contractors to clear hazardous vegetation, with costs recovered through property liens or tax assessments.
- Adjusted Inspection Timeframes for High-Risk Properties
 - Properties identified as posing significant fire hazards due to overgrown vegetation or combustible materials may be subject to:
 - More frequent inspections
 - Accelerated compliance deadlines
 - Immediate abatement requirements for extreme hazards
- California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Exemption
 - This ordinance qualifies as Categorically Exempt (Class 4) under CEQA since it focuses on minor alterations to land that do not significantly impact the environment.
 - Also falls under the "common sense" exemption (14 CCR section 15061(b)(3)), as it does not pose environmental risks but instead mitigates wildfire hazards.
- Seasonal Public Nuisance Designation
 - Parcels that have been subject to repeated fire hazard abatements in consecutive years may be classified as seasonal public nuisances.
 - This designation allows for automatic annual enforcement actions without requiring additional administrative hearings.

Strategic Benefits of the Proposed Ordinance

- Enhances Community Safety
 - Reduces wildfire risks by removing hazardous vegetation before fire season.
 - Provides firefighters with defensible space to protect homes during wildfire incidents.

- Improves Property Protection & Fire Insurance Accessibility
 - Supports efforts to create fire-safe communities that may qualify for lower fire insurance premiums.
 - Reduces risk of home destruction, infrastructure damage, and economic losses caused by wildfires.
- Ensures Fiscal Responsibility
 - Helps minimize City expenditures on wildfire response and property damage recovery.
 - Establishes a cost-recovery mechanism for abatement actions through property liens and fines.
- Aligns with State Fire Protection Mandates
 - Complies with Government Code Section 51182 and state wildfire mitigation laws.
 - Strengthens the City's adherence to CAL FIRE Fire Hazard Severity Zone designations.

Defensible Space Workshop

- The operational implementation of the vegetation management and defensible space ordinance, Chapter 6.16, will be presented to the Mayor and City Council during a future workshop. During this workshop, the detailed plans for applying and implementing the ordinance will be shared for review and discussion.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

Items contributing to the Strategic Priority No. 2 Community Well-Being and Goal No. 2.6 - Strengthen community preparedness for emergencies to ensure effective response and recovery.

This project aligns with the Cross-Cutting Threads of the City's Strategic Plan as follows:

1. **Community Trust** – By adopting the ordinance in compliance with Government Code Section 51182, the City reinforces its commitment to public safety and transparency. The ordinance establishes clear defensible space standards for property owners, ensuring they have access to accurate, science-based fire mitigation requirements.
2. **Equity** – The Fire Department is committed to providing equitable fire and life safety services for all Riverside residents. By enforcing defensible space requirements, the City ensures that all communities, regardless of location or socioeconomic status, have access to critical fire prevention resources. This ordinance empowers residents with knowledge and guidelines for reducing fire risks in their neighborhoods and supports outreach programs to assist vulnerable populations with compliance.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – The City remains committed to financial transparency and accountability in public safety investments. The Defensible Space Ordinance ensures that wildfire risk reduction is conducted systematically and cost-effectively, reducing the burden on emergency response resources and preventing costly damage to homes and infrastructure.

4. **Innovation** – The implementation of this ordinance is guided by modern wildfire science, GIS-based fire behavior modeling, and best practices in defensible space design. The ordinance incorporates research-backed strategies, including fuel reduction zones, ember-resistant landscaping, and strategic vegetation management.
5. **Sustainability & Resiliency** – The Defensible Space Ordinance strengthens the City’s ability to mitigate wildfire risks, protect homes and businesses, and promote long-term fire-resilient landscaping practices. By encouraging the use of fire-resistant plants, hardscaping, and proper vegetation management, the ordinance aligns with sustainability goals and enhances the City’s overall resilience to wildfire threats.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with receiving this item should this Urgency Ordinance be adopted.

Prepared by:	Brian Guzzetta, Deputy Fire Chief
Approved by:	Steve McKinster, Fire Chief
Certified as to availability of funds:	Kristie Thomas, Finance Director/ Assistant Chief Financial Officer
Approved by:	Mike Futrell, City Manager
Approved as to form:	Jack Liu, Interim City Attorney

Attachment:

1. Exhibit A – Proposed Urgency Ordinance
2. Presentation
3. Urgency Ordinance – Vegetation Management and Defensible Space