

City of West Lake Hills

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Dear Fellow West Lake Hills Residents:

The recent wildfires here in Central Texas and elsewhere remind us all of the devastating destruction that could befall our city if we are not careful and vigilant. I am writing you today to update you on a range of actions recently taken by the City Council and staff in order to reduce the risk of wildfire in the City of West Lake Hills.

At an emergency meeting on September 7 and again at its regular meeting on September 14, the City Council heard from a large number of citizens concerned about wildfire. The discussion was quite productive and covered every imaginable angle: from short- and long-term fire prevention strategies to preparedness and emergency response. Based on the feedback received at those meetings and in written correspondence to the Council, the following measures are currently being implemented:

1. You will notice large **red warning signs** being installed around the City in the next few days informing drivers that discarding a cigarette butt carries a \$2000 fine – the maximum allowed by state law. Spanish language versions of these signs may be added soon thereafter. We encourage residents to call 911 if you spot anyone violating this law.
2. City Inspectors will be contacting the owners of properties that have unreasonable and dangerous amounts of dead brush and trees, reminding them that they are **responsible for removing the dead wood and brush** as soon as possible.
3. Over the next two weeks, Council members will be working on the logistics for a **free dead brush collection project** similar to the ones conducted in previous years. We hope to finalize the plans for such a project and roll it out as soon as practical.
4. The City's engineering firm has been engaged to study the feasibility of installing **firefighting access roads** in various locations around the City. Likewise, the engineers will be providing the City with detailed topographical data about existing steep slopes in order to inform decisions about additional fire protections. The Council will discuss their recommendations at a future meeting.
5. Many residents have concerns about the availability of **sufficient water volumes and pressures at the 310 fire hydrants** located in the City. City staff are working with Travis County Water Control and Improvement District 10 officials on this issue. The City will work with District 10 to engage a specialized firm to test every hydrant in the city to determine if any deficiencies exist.

6. The City will be working with the Westlake Fire Department (ESD#9) to **visit construction sites** to educate workers about fire safety, remind them of the prohibition against open flame and the requirement to have adequate fire protection onsite. The City will also be any replacing **missing blue reflectors** in city streets that indicate the presence of a fire hydrant.

By far the most controversial issues related to fire safety is **the City's existing ordinances and policies governing the removal of trees** – specifically juniper (aka “cedar”) trees. Many in our community advocate the wholesale removal of cedars. Others support a less extreme program to allow selected removal of cedars. Others oppose any change to our existing tree policies in order to protect the rural look and feel of our community. The City Council took decisive action on some aspects of this issue and elected to study other aspects more thoroughly before taking action:

1. The Council approved an important change to the tree ordinances. **Property owners may request a no-fee permit to REMOVE ANY JUNIPER/CEDAR TREE with a trunk dimension of less than or equal to 3 inches in size as measured at a point 54 inches above the ground.** Trees removed under this new ordinance do not require any replacement. The thinking behind this ordinance is that the removal of the smaller trees will not have a noticeable impact on the overall “rural look and feel” of our community but will, over time, result in fewer cedars in our community. Please be aware that if you wish to take advantage of this new policy, you must contact the City to request a permit to do so.
2. The Council is actively exploring ways to **simplify and expedite the process whereby property owners may request a variance to the City's tree ordinances** to address special circumstances on high-risk properties. Currently, if a property owner wants to remove trees or vegetation that is not allowed by our ordinances, he or she must go through the same lengthy and (some feel) cumbersome variance process that is used for all other types of variances. In the next few weeks, the City Council will be considering alternatives that will allow property owners greater flexibility in getting approvals for reasonable tree removal.

There are several other initiatives that the City Council **will be considering** in the coming weeks. NO ACTION has been taken yet on these issues:

- Modify the rules for a Fire Safety Buffer Zone to allow the removal of cedars in specific areas around homes in order to create a more defensible space.
- Remove the tree canopy directly above the asphalt along Red Bud Trail and Westlake Drive – the City's two primary evacuation corridors – to ensure that burning trees do not fall and block these critical roads for evacuating residents and/or firefighting equipment.
- Request that the Wild Basin Nature Preserve be temporarily closed to visitors to reduce the risk of a wildfire starting in that area along the City's northern boundary.
- Fund improvements to Wild Basin to establish “shaded fire breaks” around its perimeter that would slow the advancement of a wildfire.
- Require non-flammable exterior materials for all new construction.
- Require KNOX devices on all new and/or existing property gates so that fire fighters can access properties more quickly in the event of a fire.

- Lobby the Texas legislature to repeal recently enacted legislation that prohibits a municipality from enacting ordinances requiring that all new residential construction include sprinkler/fire suppression systems.

I want to take this opportunity to remind you of some important actions you and your family can take to greatly reduce the risk of a wildfire impacting you and your property:

1. Prepare a "Go Kit" of critical items that you would want to take with you in the event of a fire evacuation. I strongly recommend you visit <http://www.wildlandfirersg.org/> for tips on what to include on your list.
2. Keep your gutters cleaned out and remove all dead brush and leaves from around your home. Install screens in your attic and gable vents and install skirting around elevated decks to prevent floating embers from entering these highly combustible areas.
3. Trim dead brush on the ground underneath any power line transformers and contact Austin Energy at 512-494-9400 to request that they prune branches and limbs that are too close to the power lines. Do not attempt to prune around power lines yourself... Zap!!!
4. If you have a pool, please contact Westlake Fire Department to let them know the location and size. They may need to use that water to fight a wildfire. Consider having a gasoline powered pump handy to assist with that effort (though the WLFD has its own pumps for that purpose).
5. Talk to your children about the risks of playing with matches.
6. Contact City Hall to report any unreasonably large collections of dead brush or vegetation that you notice anywhere in the City. A City Inspector will follow up with the property owners to remind them of the dead brush removal requirements.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. The City Council and I welcome your input on these issues. Our next City Council meeting will be at 7pm on Wednesday, September 28, 2011 at City Hall (911 Westlake Drive). City Council Members' email addresses and more information about Council meeting times and agendas can be found at www.westlakehills.org. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, suggestions or concerns.

Be safe!



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