



City Manager's Office

March 21, 2025

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
From: Paul Buddenhagen, City Manager
Subject: Update on Measure FF (2020): Redesigning, enhancing and expanding fire department service delivery, community preparedness and resilience

This memo gives an overview of the City of Berkeley Fire Department's implementation through February 2025 of Measure FF, a 2020 ballot measure that provides funding for fire services, emergency response, 9-1-1 communication, hazard mitigation, and wildfire prevention.

An estimated \$10 million a year generated through Measure FF taxes has funded a wide range of projects to improve disaster preparedness and department operations. Highlights include:

- Training and equipment to ensure firefighters are better prepared to handle complex emergencies
- Expansion of Emergency Medical Services Division that allowed a re-design and expansion of the City's ambulance system
- Installation of 13 Outdoor Warning System sirens across Berkeley
- Reduction of structural ignition risk through free chipping services, annual inspections, and various resident incentive programs

Read below for more details and additional projects completed by the Fire Department using Measure FF funding.

FIREFIGHTING

Updated training, equipment, and accreditation ensure that our firefighters are prepared to respond to emergencies in Berkeley's increasingly urban environment.

- **Tall Building/Highrise response:** Over the course of 18 months the Department invested in new equipment and provided training to all firefighters on the procedures and techniques necessary to respond to and mitigate incidents that occur in structures that are five stories or higher. Until now, the Department has

been trained and equipped to respond to and mitigate suburban emergencies in single family homes or low-rise developments.

- **California Office of the State Fire Marshal, State Fire Training (SFT) Accredited Local Firefighter Academy:** The Department successfully completed its five-year reaccreditation process which included a guided review and on-site inspection of policy, procedure, administrative process, equipment, facilities, recruitment statistics and more. This accreditation allows the Department to conduct SFT entry level Firefighter I & II academies and host SFT continuing education courses for employees.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL RESPONSE

An expanded Emergency Medical Services Division allows the City to respond more quickly to medical emergencies and provide better leadership and focus on continuous improvement.

- **Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Nurse:** Developed a job classification, recruited and hired a 1.0 FTE CQI Nurse that oversees the Department's quality improvement program. This helps provide non-punitive, education-based feedback to our EMS professionals.
- **Expansion of EMS Division Staff:** The EMS Division was expanded by adding 1.0 FTE Assistant Fire Chief, 1.0 FTE EMS Captain, and a 1.0 Paramedic Supervisor I. These positions, along with the CQI Nurse, have allowed the Division to develop the Department's non-firefighter EMT and Paramedic classifications, work schedules, policies, procedures, recruitment processes, entry level academies, and probationary guidelines. On-going work includes running multiple recruitment processes, entry-level academies, Field Training Officer (FTO) processes, and probation. The Department has hired and trained over 40 paramedics since 2021.
- **Mobile Paramedic Supervisor:** Developed a duty statement, developed internal policies and procedures, and configured a vehicle to support having a full-time mobile paramedic supervisor. These personnel manage the day-to-day EMS field operations within the City. This includes scheduling, personnel oversight, equipment purchasing, maintenance and responding to more significant incidents.

911 COMMUNICATIONS SERVICES

A plan for revamping the City's dispatch center lays a path forward to more efficiently answering 911 calls and delivering the appropriate services for the call.

- **Dispatch Needs Assessment:** Completed the analysis of the City's dispatch center, which provides a clear path forward to help the City offer modern fire and emergency medical call triage that will improve efficiency and deliver the right resource to each call for help. This work has now progressed to the implementation phase which involves a collaboration between the Police Department, Fire Department and labor unions.

HAZARD MITIGATION

A new outdoor warning system will broadcast alerts throughout Berkeley in the case of emergency. An evacuation study underway will identify evacuation routes and provide an analysis of how long an evacuation will take.

- **Outdoor Warning:** Installed 13 outdoor warning system sirens on top of buildings throughout Berkeley that can use broadcast tones and spoken life safety instructions. Read more [here](#).
- **Evacuation & Response Time Study:** Substantial progress has been made on the novel Evacuation and Response Time Study, that will yield results in mid-2025. This work will include analysis to comply with State evacuation requirements SB99 (identifying developments with only one way in and out), AB747 (identifying evacuation routes and their safety, capacity, and viability in a variety of hazard scenarios), and AB1409 (identifying evacuation locations).

WILDFIRE PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS

Free chipping services, annual inspections, and a pilot assistance program reduced the risk posed by fire-hazardous vegetation on private property. Public education through model gardens and events help residents understand steps to make their property safer.

- **EMBER Initiative:** In 2025 the Department launched a project to bring a set of policies to the City Council for consideration that are science and experience based and will reduce the risk of structural ignition during the next wind-driven wildfire. These policies include the creation of a buffer zone that runs along the eastern border of the city, adoption of Zone 0, incentives for home hardening, pragmatic weather-based parking restrictions, and a reaffirmation of the city's leave early program and fire department staffing levels as recommended in the Standards of Coverage analysis.
- **Fire Spread Analysis:** The City began work with external researchers to model expected fire spread in Berkeley under different wildland fire scenarios. This research will help focus education, mitigation and enforcement efforts on the entry pathways that wildfire is likely to find along the perimeter of the City.
- **Free Chipping Services (Chipper Day):** The City re-tooled and launched the free fire fuel chipping program and expanded it to serve the entire city. In 2023, over 1,200 pickups were completed which resulted in the removal of over 3,000 cubic yards of flammable vegetation. Eighty percent of participants reported that the new chipper program caused them to remove hazardous vegetation from their property, and 92% of participants rated their experience a "5 out of 5". Reserve an appointment [here](#).
- **Model Firesafe Garden:** The City designed and is in the process of installing model firesafe gardens around Firehouse #4 (Marin and The Alameda) that will provide residents several examples of landscape design that is also wildfire safe.

- **1923 Firestorm Commemoration:** The City planned and hosted a commemorative event 100 years after this devastating fire that swept through the community. The event was attended by thousands of residents and featured vendors, educational booths, fire engines, and the first test of the city-wide outdoor warning system.
- **Mobile Water Delivery:** The City procured a new vehicle capable of delivering 3,000 gallons of water to areas adjacent to the City that do not have EBMUD hydrant infrastructure to help fight a developing wildfire, or to conduct firefighting following a seismic event that disrupts water delivery infrastructure. See more [here](#).
- **Defensible Space Inspection Program:**
 - **Annual Inspections:** The City performs an average of 11,000 inspections annually. These inspections provide residents a clear road map of actions they can take to make their homes more wildfire safe.
 - **Education First:** The City focuses on an education-first approach and aims to build a coalition of the willing. However, enforcement mechanisms are necessary when these efforts are not successful. The City re-built its citation program and launched it in the Summer of 2024. Less than 5% of violations persist by the citation step; to date we have issued 15 citations.
- **Resident Assistance Program (RAP):** The City launched a Resident Assistance Pilot Program to help residents who are financially or physically unable to conduct defensible space activities to meet city and state codes.
 - **Pilot RAP:** In 2023 the pilot aided 23 residents with removing 95 cubic yards of material. The pilot program's success was used to apply for a \$1,000,000 grant that was awarded in September 2024 and will allow the program to greatly expand its impact over the three-year performance period.
 - **Fire Zone 2:** In 2023 the City conducted a one-time program to help qualified households create defensible space on their parcels in one of the highest risk areas within the City. This program informed the internal process that will allow for a more extensive home-hardening campaign this year.
 - **One-Time Eucalyptus Understory Cleanup:** Following Council action in 2024, the Department provided one-time understory cleanup to residents in the fire zones who have Eucalyptus trees on their property. These actions reduce the wildfire risk in these areas. To date 20 properties have been mitigated and 450 yards of material have been removed.
 - **Support of vegetation clean up on public land:** The WUI division has taken advantage of opportunities to support vegetation management where possible. This year, that has included clean up and mitigation projects at Berkeley's Tuolumne Camp, John Hinkel Park, and myriad public paths throughout the city with the intention of both mitigating violations and protecting additional pedestrian evacuation routes.

GENERAL EXPENDITURES THAT IMPACT MULTIPLE DIVISIONS

Staff raised more than 10 million in grant funding to support staffing, programs to reduce fire-hazardous vegetation, and employee wellness. A new Fire Department headquarters and a plan for modernizing fire stations ensure that staff have the necessary facilities to deliver excellent emergency services.

- **Grants:** Because of Measure FF funding, the Department now has the capacity to identify grants that meet specific department and safety projects, apply, and administer them. The following awards have occurred in FY24 – 25.
 - **FEMA Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant:** \$7,7m to up-staff three (3) fire engines to four-person staffing for a grant performance period of three years. This will bring the City in alignment with a substantial portion of the staffing recommendations from the Citygate Standards of Coverage and Community Risk Assessment, completed in 2023.
 - **CalFIRE Wildfire Prevention Grant:** \$1m to implement the Berkeley Hills Defensible Space Resident Assistance Program (RAP) in the VHFHSZ of the Berkeley Hills over a three-year period. Will aid residents who are low-income, prioritizing senior citizens, those with physical disabilities, and/or those who are acutely low-income to create defensible space within Zone 0 (0 to 5 feet), Zone 1 (5 to 30 feet) and Zone 2 (30 feet to 100 feet) on their properties in compliance with State Law and following wildfire prevention best practices. Read more [here](#).
 - **CalFIRE Grant:** The City received \$448,000 to fund a project to remediate vegetation along Grizzly Peak and adjacent evacuation routes to protect the more than 29,000 structures in the area and keep evacuation routes clear in the event of a wildfire. Read more [here](#).
 - **California Fire Safe Council Grant:** The City received \$200,000 to fund a position within the City that will work to develop county-wide collaboration and coordination among various wildfire mitigation groups. Read more [here](#).
 - **FEMA Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG):** The City received \$763,636 to fund a three-year program to enhance employee wellness. The grant funds two full-time on-site specialists that focus on improving employee nutrition, fitness and mental performance.
- **External Communication:** Recruited and hired a full time Public Information Officer (PIO) to help the Fire Department enhance communication with the community.
- **Facility Master Plan:** Most of Berkeley's fire stations were built in the 1960's. Since their original construction, most Department facilities have undergone some modifications but not to the extent necessary to properly house modern apparatus, equipment, additional units and new staff, nor to meet current policy, codes and health, safety and inclusion standards. Without further renovation, replacement or relocation,

the stations will continue to fall short of addressing the present-day needs and expanding and changing operational demands. The purpose of the Berkeley Fire Department Facilities Master Plan (FMP) is to provide City leaders with a ten-year strategic approach for addressing the City's aging, undersized, and outdated essential facilities to meet today's needs and anticipated demands on Berkeley's fire and emergency services. Read/watch more [here](#).

- **New & Expanded Fire Department Headquarters:** After four years of searching throughout the region the City was successfully entered into a long-term lease for a new Fire Headquarters. This facility will have room to house additional employees that have or will be hired to perform the work funded by Measure FF and will include an ambulance deployment center which will be a key piece of the City's re-design of its emergency medical service delivery program.

cc: David White, Deputy City Manager
Scott Ferris, Director, Parks, Recreation & Waterfront
Terrance Davis, Director, Public Works
Jenny Wong, City Auditor
Mark Numainville, City Clerk
Matthai Chakko, Communications Director/Assistant to the City Manager
Farimah Brown, City Attorney