



Memorandum

TO: PUBLIC SAFETY, FINANCE AND STRATEGIC SUPPORT COMMITTEE
FROM: Robert Sapien, Jr.

SUBJECT: Wildfire Prevention and Preparedness Status Report
DATE: May 28, 2026

Approved

Date: June 3, 2026

RECOMMENDATION

Accept the status report on efforts to prevent and prepare for wildfire events in the City's Wildland-Urban Interface.

BACKGROUND

In May 2025, the Fire Department (Department) presented its *2025 San José Wildfire Planning and Preparedness Study Session*¹ to the Mayor and City Council, providing an overview of the City's wildfire risk, preparedness level, multi-agency coordination model, and risk reduction priorities. The presentation was prompted in part by the devastating Palisades and Eaton fires that struck Los Angeles County in January 2025. Collectively, the fires burned more than 21,000 acres, destroyed over 16,000 structures, claimed 30 lives, and heightened awareness of wildfire risk to the urban environment across the state. The Department committed to returning to the Public Safety, Finance, and Strategic Support Committee in spring 2026 to provide an update on wildland fire preparedness and mitigation activities, including progress toward reducing community risk and enhancing overall readiness in San José. This report outlines the Department's ongoing efforts to support wildfire preparedness, risk reduction, community education, legislative engagement, and interagency coordination heading into the 2026 fire season.

The Fiscal Year 2025-2026 budget process provided funding and direction related to wildfire prevention and preparedness, including the following:

¹ <https://sanjose.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=14159902&GUID=EB87244F-EA3B-4787-BCAA-E13CCBA26938&G=920296E4-80BE-4CA2-A78F-32C5EFCF78AF>

- *As directed in the Mayor's March Budget Message for Fiscal Year 2025-2026, as approved by the City Council, adds ongoing non-personal/equipment funding of \$167,000 to continue the use of an evacuation and management software platform that provides real-time notifications, public status updates, and multi-agency coordination during emergencies.*
- *San José's wildfire risk extends beyond land within the City's control. While the City Manager's Information Memo provided a helpful assessment of fuel reduction efforts in City-owned parkland, we rely on information from the County, CalFire, and private property owners to quantify the full scope of fuel reduction responsibilities and efforts across all land in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). The City Manager is directed to solicit information from these partners to devise a comprehensive assessment of vegetation management activities within high-risk WUI lands, quantifying high-risk acreage, monitoring capacity, and annual fuel reduction actions by the responsible jurisdiction (e.g. city, county, state, private property owner).*
- *New tools and approaches can help us reduce fire risk and improve evacuation plans. The East Bay Regional Park District recently conducted a large-scale aerial assessment project for 125,000 acres of parkland to determine where thinning might most effectively reduce wildfire risk. San José State University (SJSU) is home to the Wildfire Interdisciplinary Research Center, which could provide the expertise needed to conduct similar work using emerging AI-powered tools. The City Manager is directed to engage SJSU and other public and private technical partners to explore partnerships to improve the City's prevention and response efforts.*

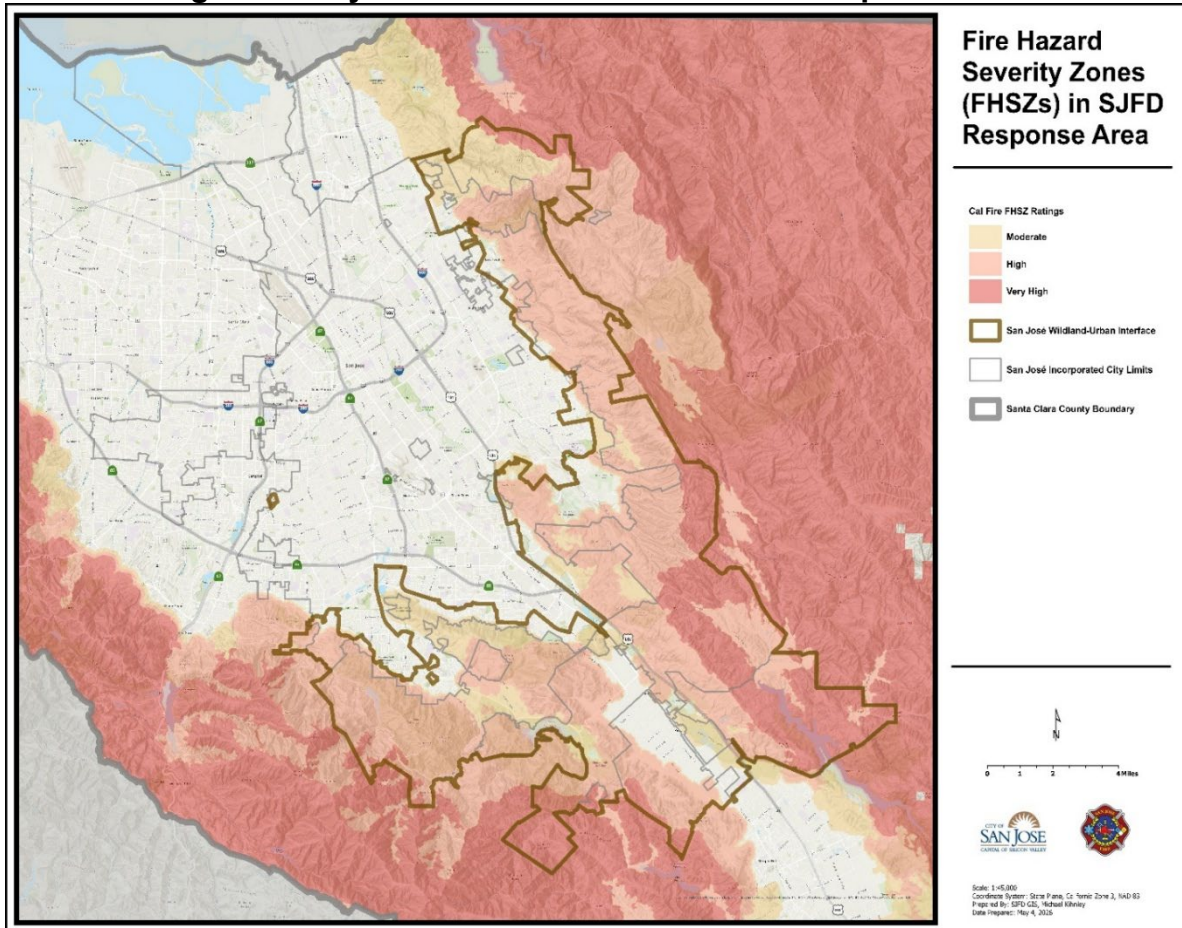
Progress on these items are described below.

ANALYSIS

San José Current Wildland Fire Hazards and Risk

Much of the City's Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas reside within State Responsibility Areas (SRAs). SRAs include lands where the State of California, through the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), has primary responsibility for wildfire prevention, protection, and suppression. As part of this mandate, the Office of the State Fire Marshal designates Fire Hazard Severity Zones (FHSZ) within the SRA, based on factors such as fuel load, terrain, and historical fire weather patterns. These classifications are illustrated for the City in Figure 1, which highlights areas of moderate, high, and very-high wildfire hazard. SRA FHSZ mapping was completed in late 2023 and went into effect in April 2024. Local Responsibility Area (LRA) FHSZ mapping ensued.

Figure 1: City of San José FHSZs in SJFD Response Area

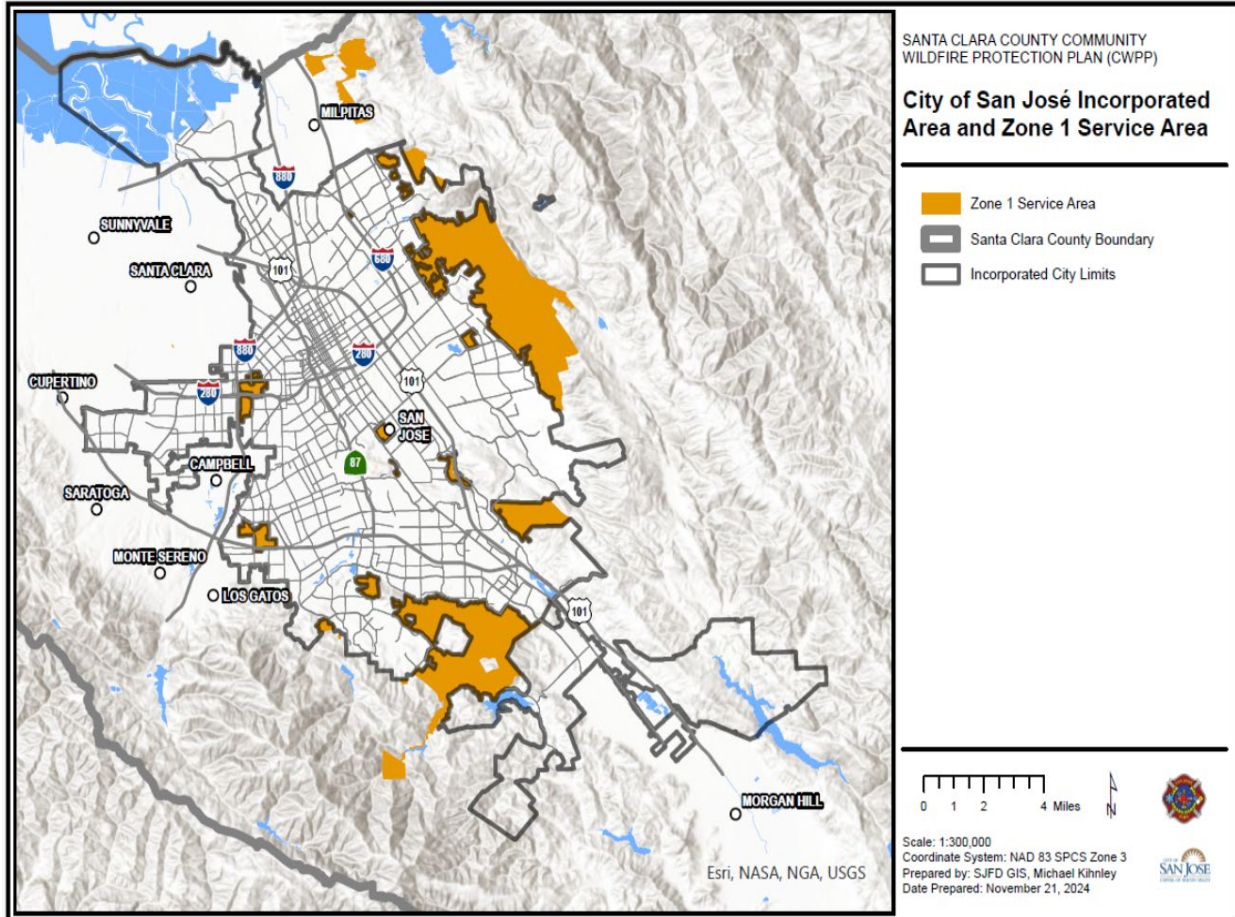


State law requires all WUI areas in California to be evaluated for wildfire potential and severity. SRAs are then adopted by the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection. CAL FIRE then forwards LRA evaluation recommendations to the respective local governing agency (i.e., city municipalities) for adoption. The local governing agency is required to act upon any area recommended for very high Fire Hazard Severity Zone designation. Effective June 17, 2025, City Council voted to adopt City Ordinance 31213², thus defining San José WUI as all moderate, high, and very high FHSZs as designated by the State Fire Marshal and adopted by the City of San José, as well as additional areas within the City of San José as set forth and delineated on Figure 1 above entitled "San José Fire Department Wildland Urban Interface." With the adoptions of the moderate, high, and very high FHSZs as part of the WUI Area in LRAs, new construction and defensible space must now be compliant with WUI construction regulations outlined in *Title 24, Part 7 California Wildland-Urban Interface Code* in the California Code of Regulations.

² https://library.municode.com/ca/san_jose/ordinances/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=1363719

The LRA includes all areas served by the Department, encompassing both the incorporated city limits and the unincorporated areas covered under the Zone 1 Agreement. These areas are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: City of San José Incorporated Area and Zone 1 Service Area



Tactical Integrated Emergency Response (TIER) – Vegetation Fires

The TIER is the Department’s predetermined wildland resource model that delivers a specific combination of engines, wildland apparatus, water supply, and command resources to a vegetation fire incident. Shown in Table 1, the model uses three escalating levels (TIER I, II, and III) that allow the Department to rapidly scale its operational response to match the size, complexity, and hazard demands of the vegetation fire event.

Table 1. TIER Level Model

TIER Level	Resources / Actions
TIER I – Initial Wildland Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 Battalion Chiefs • 3 Type 1 Engine Companies

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Engine Tender Company (Type 1 Engine + Water Tender) • 1 Type 3 Engine Company • CAL FIRE notification for incidents within WUI, SRA, or Mutual Threat Zones
TIER II – Adds to TIER I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Battalion Chief (3 total) • 4 Type 1 Engine Companies (7 total) • 1 Engine Tender Company (2 total) • 1 Type 3 Engine Company (2 total) • REDNET announcement advising no SJFD units available for mutual aid • Duty Mechanic and GSA Fuel Truck (as needed)
TIER III – Adds to TIERS I & II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Battalion Chief (4 total) • 2 Type 1 Engine Companies (9 total) • 1 Wildland Engine Company • 1 Santa Clara County Mutual Aid Wildland Task Force (2 Type 6 engines, 2 Type 3 engines, 1 Water Tender, 1 Battalion Chief) • Notify all Santa Clara County fire departments to stand by for mutual aid • Request CAL FIRE response if not already engaged
Beyond TIER III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources requested through County Mutual Aid system (strike teams, task forces, individual resources) • City Manager and affected City Council member(s) notified

The Department recently updated its Wildland TIER Model in 2026 to improve response efficiency and reduce total response times to wildland fires. The updated model dispatches the closest available units rather than relying on pre-designated Wildland Companies, allowing for faster water application and more flexible citywide coverage. Under the revised model, a TIER I response now includes seven units (five suppression companies and two command officers), aligning with the risk-based resource levels the Department already applies to structure fires and other high-risk incidents. Resources are assigned based on proximity while still including a Type 3 engine and water tender to maintain wildland-specific capability. This adjustment reduces total TIER response time by nearly half, limiting projected fire spread during the critical early attack phase. The updated model also strengthens coverage in WUI areas by keeping wildland engine companies available in high-risk zones rather than routinely pulling them into urban creek or roadside fires.

Vegetation fires within the Department's response area are not evenly distributed across the City. Figure 3 depicts a heavier concentration in urbanized areas and the WUI of the East Foothills Planning Area. To address this risk, the Department has developed the TIER model, a data-driven deployment strategy that aligns Department fire suppression resources and multi-agency coordination with the highest levels of vegetation fire activity.

By concentrating capability in proximity to the highest-risk corridors, the TIER framework reduces response times, improves containment outcomes during initial attack, and provides a scalable platform for multi-agency coordination when incidents escalate beyond local resources.

Figure 3: City of San José FY 2024-2025 TIER Fires and Local FHSZs

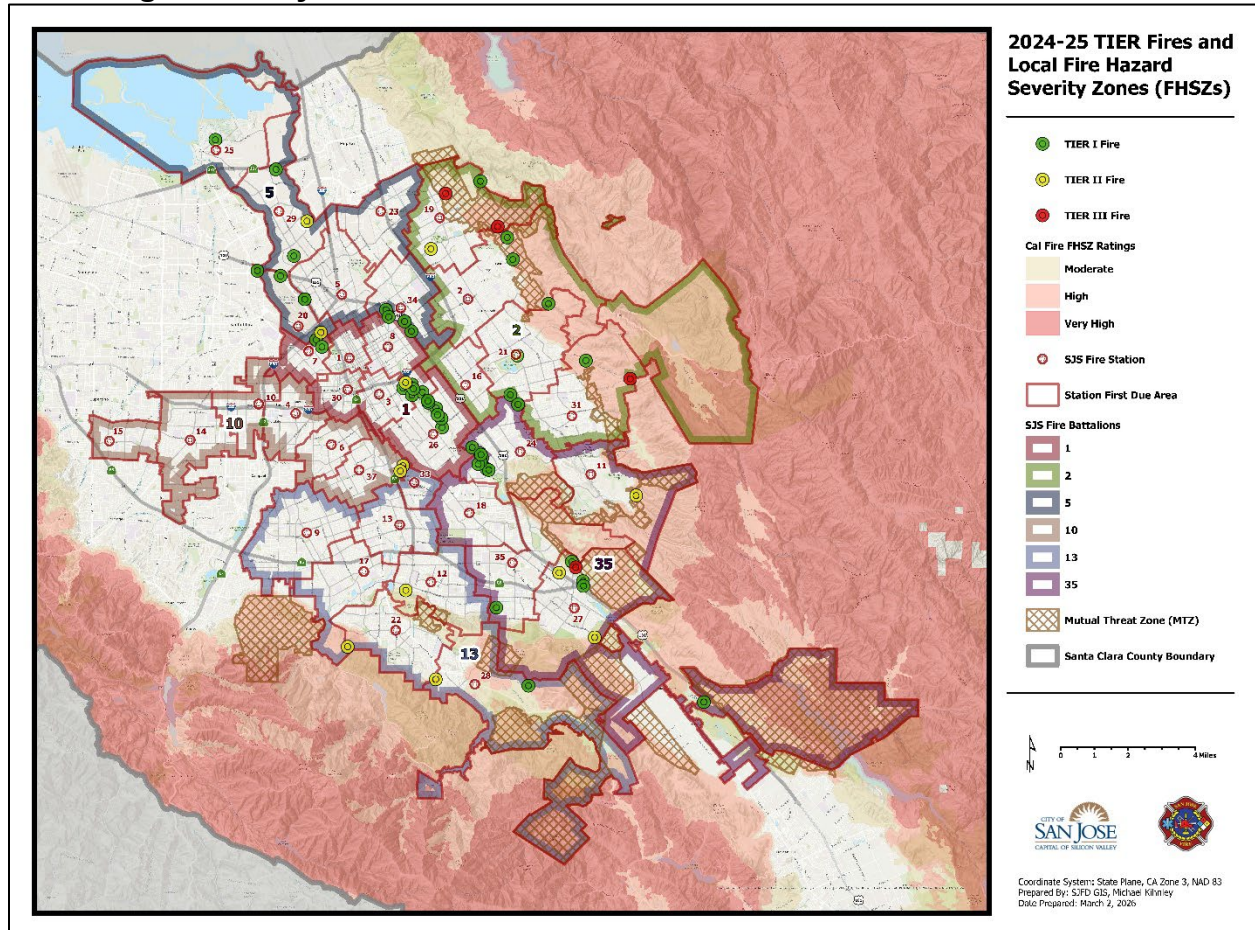
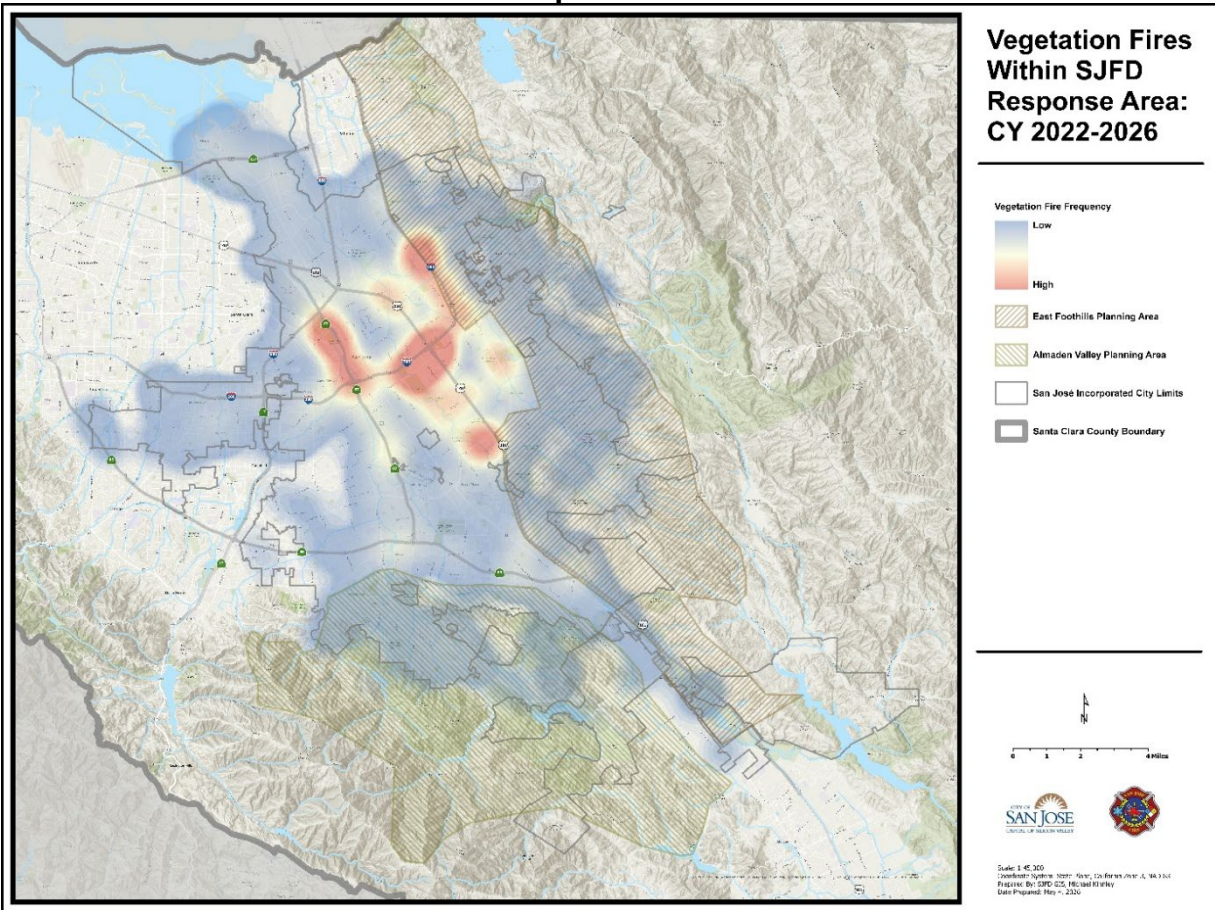


Figure 4 highlights that the highest frequency of vegetation fire activity occurs in central and eastern San José along the US-101, I-680, and I-880 corridors, with hot spots extending from downtown eastward towards Alum Rock and the Capitol Expressway/US-101 interchange. Other elevated vegetation fire incident areas are located around Story Road and South San José adjacent to the East Foothills, where unmaintained parcels, encampment activity, and transportation corridors in proximity to receptive dry vegetation elevate fire risk. While the Almaden Valley Planning Area and the broader East Foothills Planning Area represent the most vegetation-dense landscapes, the data confirms that wildfires are concentrated in these highly urbanized areas and along the perimeter of the WUI.

Figure 4: City of San José Calendar Years 2022-2026 Vegetation Fires in SJFD Response Area



Wildfire Response Resource Availability

The Department maintains specialized wildland firefighting apparatus designed for the challenging terrain found in San José's WUI areas. This includes Type 3 engines with off-road four-wheel-drive capabilities and water tenders equipped with 2,000-gallon water tanks to provide sustained water supply in areas with limited or unavailable fire hydrant coverage. This specialized equipment is critical to the Department's ability to mount an effective initial attack in the East Foothills, Almaden Valley, and other WUI areas where road access and water supply present unique operational challenges. The unincorporated areas within the Department's service areas receive fire responses from the Department and, because these areas are designated as SRA, also receive a full wildland fire response from CAL FIRE during fire season. Normal CAL FIRE wildland response includes Chief Officers, fire engines, air tankers based at Hollister Air Attack Base, and a helicopter from Alma Helitack Base located in Los Gatos adjacent to the Lexington Reservoir. Additionally, bulldozers and hand crews provide significant ground-suppression resources to complement the Department's initial attack capabilities.

Interagency Coordination

The Department maintains a strong, ongoing relationship with CAL FIRE's Santa Clara Unit and fire agencies throughout Santa Clara County. These partnerships are formalized through the Annual Operating Plan, MTZ agreements, and the California Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid System, all of which define how agencies coordinate during wildland fire incidents that cross jurisdictional boundaries. The Department works closely with CAL FIRE to ensure seamless communication, resource sharing, and unified command during major wildland fire events. In addition to CAL FIRE, the Department coordinates regularly with the Santa Clara County Fire Department, the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council, and other local fire agencies to maintain a regionally integrated response. This multi-agency coordination framework ensures that the region's collective resources can be mobilized quickly and effectively when the threat demands it. Additionally, the Department is actively continuing its relationship with San José State University's Wildfire Interdisciplinary Research Center, as it explores the integration of ongoing technologies into its wildfire prevention and response strategy. This partnership reflects the Department's commitment to leveraging university expertise and cutting-edge technology to enhance fuel mapping, aerial surveillance, and situational awareness across San José's WUI.

Genasys Protect: Evacuation Notification Software

As directed in the Mayor's March Budget Message for Fiscal Year 2025-2026, and as approved by the City Council through the 2025-2026 Adopted Operating Budget, the Department was allocated ongoing funding to continue the use of an evacuation and management software platform that provides real-time notifications, public status updates, and multi-agency coordination during emergencies. The Department utilizes the evacuation software provided by *Genasys Protect*. This software aids in the protection of homes and neighborhoods that are in high-risk wildfire areas. As part of the Department's wildfire risk reduction campaign, residents were provided information on how to protect their properties and build resiliency by creating defensible space, reducing fuels, and preparing evacuations – to which the City showcased *Genasys Protect* as a useful, life-saving tool to support evacuation preparedness that is free and available for residents to download.

Public Education & Community Outreach

Community-level engagement reflects the Department's continued commitment to reaching residents in WUI areas with direct, actionable preparedness information and is consistent with the Department's Strategic Business Plan³. The Plan further identifies providing support to groups uniquely dependent on Department services and creating opportunities to engage community members directly as key objectives of the Community Alliance focus area.

³ https://sj-admin.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/2015_0416_SanJoseFD_StratPlan.pdf

The Department has significantly expanded its public education and community outreach efforts in the WUI areas. In partnership with the City Manager's Office of Emergency Management, the Department has delivered 10 presentations to neighborhood associations, organizations, and community centers across the city, including Almaden Valley, Santa Teresa, Berryessa Neighborhood Associations, the Villages, the Alum Rock community, and the Mayfair, Evergreen, Southside, Camden, and Almaden Community Centers. These presentations educate residents about wildfire risk, defensible space requirements, home hardening, and evacuation planning, ensuring that residents across multiple City Council Districts receive consistent, accurate, and actionable wildfire preparedness information ahead of the 2026 fire season. This work aligns directly with the Department's Strategic Business Plan focus area of Community Alliance, which emphasizes building effective relationships with all stakeholders and strengthening public engagement and education.

Additionally, the Department hosted "Fire Side Chats" at the Villages, providing residents of this 1,200-acre senior active-living community with targeted wildfire-preparedness education in an open-discussion setting. The Villages Fire Side Chat series is part of the broader CAL Chiefs WUI Risk Reduction Program and reflects the Department's commitment to reaching residents in high-risk WUI areas through interactive community-based engagement.

WUI Wildfire Risk Reduction Education Campaign

Through funding administered by FEMA's 2023 Fire Prevention & Safety grant program, the Department developed and delivered multilingual educational materials, including brochures, door hangers, digital advertisements, and presentations for community meetings. Frontline personnel conducted visual risk assessments at nearly 7,000 homes in the highest-risk neighborhoods. The curriculum used in these outreach efforts covers a comprehensive range of wildfire preparedness topics, including assembling emergency go-kits, enrolling in local emergency alert systems, developing family communication plans, and identifying evacuation routes. These activities directly support the Community Wildfire Protection Plan's strategic goals of increasing wildfire risk awareness, improving household and community preparedness, and strengthening resilience in WUI areas.

As the WUI Wildfire Risk Reduction Education Campaign nears completion of its assessment and education of all residents in the Moderate, High, and Very-High FHSZs, the Department is in the early stages of evaluating a formal WUI inspection program. It continues to monitor state legislative activity and the rulemaking process for California Assembly Bill 3074 (2004)⁴, Senate Bill 504 (2024)⁵, Assembly Bill 1455 (2025)⁶, and the accompanying Governor's Executive Order N-18-25⁷, which requires

⁴ [Bill Text: CA AB3074 | 2019-2020 | Regular Session | Chaptered | LegiScan](#)

⁵ [Bill Text: CA SB504 | 2023-2024 | Regular Session | Amended | LegiScan](#)

⁶ [Bill Text: CA AB1455 | 2025-2026 | Regular Session | Chaptered | LegiScan](#)

⁷ [Executive Orders and Proclamations - California State Library](#)

the State Board of Forestry and Fire Prevention to create and implement an ember-resistant zone within five feet of structures. The program is currently in draft form and is designed to be implemented in two phases: education and outreach in phase one, and progress toward compliance in phase two.

Collaboration with the American Red Cross — Suncrest Neighborhood

Another notable outreach effort is the Department's collaboration with the American Red Cross and the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council in the Suncrest neighborhood. This partnership brought together the disaster preparedness expertise of the Red Cross, the local fire safety knowledge of the FireSafe Council, and the professional emergency response experience of the Department to deliver personalized wildfire preparedness education directly to residents in this high-risk WUI area.

In addition to ensuring residents understand the importance of creating defensible space around their homes to reduce the likelihood their property will be impacted by a wildfire, outreach visits focused on helping residents pack a go-kit for quick evacuation, sign up for local emergency alerts, develop a family communication plan, and plan their evacuation routes. The goal is to ensure that each household is equipped with the knowledge and tools to take meaningful action before wildfires threaten their community.

San José Firewise USA Recognized Communities

Firewise USA is a program administered by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) that provides a framework for communities to reduce their wildfire risk through education, planning, and action. Recognition as a Firewise USA community requires residents to work collaboratively to assess their wildfire hazard, develop a community action plan, and invest time and resources in mitigation activities. Recognized communities must complete annual reporting to maintain their status. The program emphasizes shared responsibility among residents, local government, and fire agencies to create fire-adapted communities better prepared to survive wildfires with minimal loss.

The Department has expanded its Firewise USA-recognized communities from one to three. This significant accomplishment reflects the Department's continued commitment to building fire-resilient neighborhoods across the City's WUI areas. The Miradero-Crothers Road and Rancho San Vicente communities both achieved Firewise USA recognition following the 2025 Wildfire Planning and Preparedness Study Session, joining The Villages Golf and Country Club, which completed its recognition in 2024. The Department is currently supporting three additional communities as they complete their Firewise USA applications, further expanding the City's fire-resilient neighborhoods.

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EVALUATION & FOLLOW UP

No further follow-up is anticipated at this time. Should the Committee accept this report with the direction to provide annual updates, the Department will incorporate the status of its wildland fire preparedness and mitigation efforts in its Operations Annual Report.

COORDINATION

This memorandum has been coordinated with the City Attorney's Office and City Manager's Budget Office.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Sapien, Jr.", written in a cursive style.

ROBERT SAPIEN, JR.
Fire Chief, Fire Department

For questions, please contact Robert Sapien, Jr., Fire Chief, at robert.sapien@sanjoseca.gov or (408) 794-6952.