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## Planning ahead for future fire safety

By Lou Fancher

The Lafayette City Council on Dec. 13 received a fire safety presentation from Jeff Peter, assistant fire chief of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. As the city's new fire safety liaison coming onboard in 2022, Peter recapped the 2021 fire season and provided updates about past and ongoing county and city action plans and steps residents can take to improve and maintain fire safety.

A well-known fact is that the wildland fire season throughout California begins earlier and lasts longer than ever before. In 2021, fires in Northern California were higher in number than those in the southern regions of the state. Largely attributing it to conditions related to drought, Peter said the annual pattern during the last three years indicates mega fires that exceed millions of acres burned are on the increase. In Contra Costa County, the most dangerous fires were wind-driven. The number of fires in 2021 increased over 2020: in the state, the increase was nearly 10%, rising from 1,411 to 1,528; in Lafayette, exterior fires rose from 2020's total of 14 to 20 for November 2021. (Fire categories generally are divided into structural, exterior and vegetation classifications according to origin of the fire, although any one fire can include all three.)

"The outlook for 2022 and beyond really isn't much different," said Peters. "Many people think when we get a lot or rain that it actually helps out and that can help out if the fields don't dry up as early in a fire season. But if it isn't that fire season (that danger is imposed ironically by rain) it's the second fire season after that because we have a lot more fuel on the ground that spreads the fire."

The report from Peters had some good news: preparedness and planning held most fires in 2021 to 10 acres or less. Residents who perform grass and vegetation mitigation reduced the risk significantly. Peters said a homeowner or property owner who clears old growth, dead trees, tall grasses and shrubs "makes a huge difference."

The Firewise USA program phased in across the county and supported by the Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission in partnership with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District will continue, Peter said. Enhancing prevention, planning, resources and technological capabilities are ongoing efforts the recently passed Measure X will fund. Fuel reduction and safety enhancements that fit the \$32.3 million fire and emergency medical services measures parameters are separately covered in one-time expenditures such as equipment purchases (\$18.8 million) and ongoing expenses (\$13.5 million).

Most impactful for Lafayette is a \$2.5 million allocation for grants and funding aimed at lowering wildfire threat through risk reduction programs. Peters said because the funds can be used to support countywide resources. This means county equipment and personnel responding to a fire will be able to assist and stay on the scene longer, thereby freeing up local trucks and firefighters to return sooner to other services. In closing comments, Peter urged residents to jump to the front of the line in their communities and "be first" to take preventative safety steps. He advocated reading and following steps outlined in the county fire safety guide, signing up for CWS (Community Warning Service alerts), developing a clear family evacuation plan, making and updating annually a "go bag" kit, knowing neighbors' special needs, and preparing in advance for PSPS (public safety power shut offs).

Responding to questions from Council Member Wei-Tai Kwok about the forecast for fires in the next five to 10 years and actions residents and the city council can take to be prepared, Peters said taking advantage of new fire detection technologies and real time alerts will be vital. He encouraged the council to be keenly aware of the continued threat fires pose to a city and its residents, have adequate funding ready for when it is needed, and repeatedly communicate with residents the importance of preparing their properties for maximum safety.

Mayor Susan Candell asked about city development projects that will mean buildings in Lafayette increase in height. The lack of a ladder truck leaves Lafayette dependent on using equipment from neighboring cities and towns in the event of a structural fire involving a tall building with multiple floors.

Peter said he and Deputy Fire Chief Aaron McAlister plan to tour the city to look for possible places for relocating Station 15. The driveway exit at Station 15 is too steep for the largest firefighting trucks. Peter said every moment a firefighter has to spend climbing extra sets of stairs is time used up that could be spent putting out structure fires. The equipment such as a ladder truck, he said, will be important to have eventually because of Lafayette's increasing development density.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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