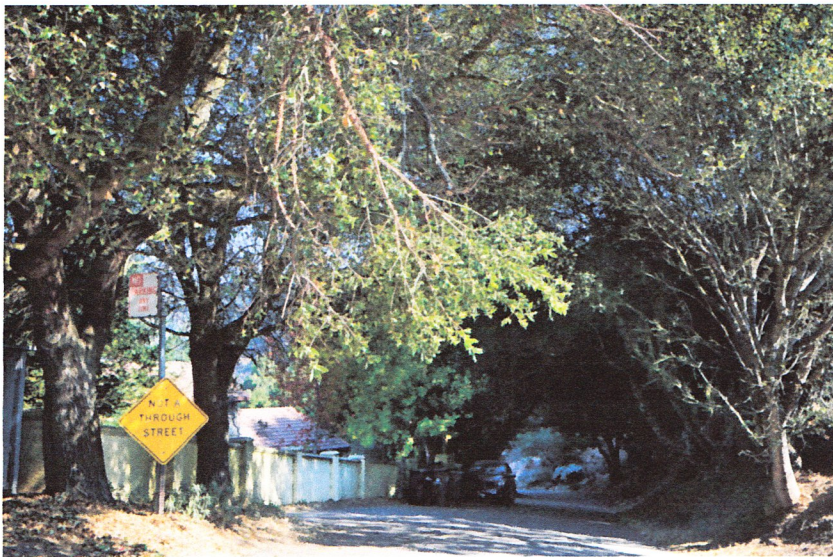


26 years after firestorm, Oakland struggles with compliance in fire-prone hills



Broken branches and untrimmed trees tower over a narrow dead end street off Norfolk Road in the Oakland Hills on Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2017. This is one of many preventable fire hazards outlined in the city's vegetation management requirements. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

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OAKLAND — For years, Oakland Hills residents have looked at woody, weedy, overgrown lots in their neighborhoods and scoffed at the fire department’s annual claims that fire safety is under control in the fire-prone area.

Now, a new study by a nonprofit working to reduce wildfires has concluded residents are right.

The eye-ball survey of properties in the Oakland Hills looked at defensible space — the buffer between building structures and vegetation that can help ignite or spread fires. The results found there is a disconnect between the city’s traditional figures of high compliance and “the reality of compliance on both private and public properties.”

The Oakland Firesafe Council’s study released this month also highlighted the historic dangers of the Oakland/Berkeley hills, where on Oct. 20, 1991, a devastating conflagration killed 25 people, and injured hundreds more.

The inferno began when high winds stirred up hot embers from a small grass fire the day before. The out-of-control blaze destroyed more than 3,000 homes as it raged in the steep, tightly packed streets above Tunnel Road and raced uphill, downhill, every direction, jumping freeways and burning through Hiller Highlands, Broadway Terrace, Upper Rockridge and more before it was brought under control the next day. The fire consumed 790 homes the first hour.

As if the anniversary were not painful enough, multiple fires in the North Bay this month that have killed 42 people and destroyed more than 5,000 homes and businesses — 3,000 of them in Santa Rosa alone. That tragedy serves as a sobering and urgent reminder to longtime hills residents unable to shake the fear that another fire could sweep across Oakland.

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A recent string of smaller East Bay fires, including one last Sunday near the Oakland Zoo, put 1991 firestorm survivor Sue Piper on edge.

“We’re damn lucky ... there was no winds,” said Piper, the president of the Firesafe Council. She has dedicated herself to educating residents about fire dangers since losing her home 26 years ago. “There but for the grace of God, we could be the North Bay again.”

Each fire season, firefighters are assigned to inspect about 21,000 properties, beginning in May with subsequent checks in June, July and October if homes and other land do not comply with defensible space requirements defined by the city.

Crews check for trees that are overgrown or hanging over homes, ivy growing on houses, thick brush in yards or open land and dead vegetation. In recent years, the Oakland Fire Department’s fire prevention bureau reported that 95 percent of properties or higher are in compliance.

But in the first-of-its-kind survey, members of the Firesafe Council got in cars and drove from street to street in District 1, from the Warren Freeway to Grizzly Peak and Broadway Terrace to Claremont Canyon, where many homes burned in the 1991 fire, and District 4 above Montclair, which was mostly spared and therefore remains more heavily wooded.

Those areas made up the now-defunct Wildfire Prevention Assessment District, where hills residents in high fire-prone areas paid to fund vegetation-management efforts until its money ran out and it closed in June, four years after district voters narrowly rejected renewing it.

In District 1, the drive-by survey found one in three private properties and about half of the public properties were out of compliance as of July 31.

In District 4, many streets, including Shepherd Canyon Road and Paso Robles, Balboa and Manzanita drives, showed that between 10 and 15 percent of properties were out of compliance, according to the survey. It was much higher on the 5800 block of Snake Road (33 percent), the 2000 block of Drake Drive (43 percent) and the 5900 block of Zinn Drive (53 percent).

On Wednesday, Piper and her council vice president, Dinah Benson, guided a tour through the winding, narrow streets of District 1, where the 1991 firestorm originated on land above Buckingham Boulevard near Grizzly Peak, and quickly spread



Untrimmed redwood trees grow in between two homes in the Oakland hills, violating the 10-foot defensible space required by the city's vegetation management program, on Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2017. The 26th anniversary of the Oakland Hills fire is Oct. 20. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

by flying embers. Most of the victims were trapped as they tried to escape the flames on congested, twisting roads.

On the 7000 block of Norfolk Road, Piper pointed to a grove of Redwood trees hanging over and touching rooftops. To be in compliance, a property needs at least 10 feet of space between the structure and the vegetation. On Buckingham, there were plenty of properties that would have again made the council's survey list.

They noted that some of the properties identified in the the survey, which has been sent to the

Oakland City Council's Public Safety Committee, either passed inspections when they should not have, or at the time of the survey were still waiting a second or third inspection, which could indicate a shortage in fire staff. Benson believes the staff shortage is the culprit in many cases.

"The fear is the city is telling people properties are safe," she said. "In fact, the city has left them very vulnerable to fires."

This year, the vegetation-management unit led by supervisor Vince Crudele had two full-time inspectors and at most two part-timers, according to the city. Crudele did not respond to emails and calls for comment. Neither did fire Marshal Miguel Trujillo.

Training and staffing woes have long been a problem in the hills inspection program. As this news organization reported last December, obtained emails showed Crudele had complained to Trujillo and others about as many as 28 properties with fire hazards that firefighters had marked compliant, as well as inspection reports completely missing from the system.

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One example of the department's struggle to reach every property before the fire season's end — and the necessity for property owners to be proactive — can be found at Head Royce School, along Lincoln Avenue. For months, neighbors of the 250 homes that surround the private school's 21 acres of property have complained about overgrown shrubbery and fire danger at the north campus and former Lincoln Child Center on the south.

The north campus failed compliance inspections in June and July, fire records show, but a school official on Thursday appeared to blame the city, saying the vacant Lincoln Child Center was never inspected until recently.

"The fact is they never stepped foot on the southern campus until one week ago," said Jerry Mullaney, director of operations at the school.

Seeing overgrown lots and streets littered with debris is especially tough for Howard Matis, who nearly died on Charing Cross Road trying to escape the 1991 fire. Eight people perished on that street.

"I keep calling to get the city to pick up debris. Nothing happens," said Matis. "The city has a tarp on Charing Cross and money to fix the slope for many years ... eventually, the area will slide.

"I don't want to be burned on that street a second time," he said.