

CITY OF OAKLAND



150 FRANK H. OGAWA PLAZA • 3RD FLOOR • OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

Office of the Fire Chief
Reginald D. Freeman

Re: ADU Planning Code Amendments and Restrictions on Parcels Located in City of Oakland's Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone (VHFHSZ)

Director Gilchrist,

I am offering this letter of support for the staff proposal regarding the ADU Planning Code Amendments and the restrictions that are included that would prohibit the development and construction of new Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) in the city's Fire Hazard Severity Zone (VHFHSZ). I urge the Planning Commission to recommend this prohibition to the City Council as part of the proposed ADU Planning Code amendments.

Wildfires are a natural part of California's landscape and the potential risk of wildfires impacting communities in, and adjacent to, forested areas are at an all-time high. In the last few years, California has experienced the deadliest and most destructive wildfires in its history. Devastating wildfires have become the norm in recent years, with dozens of deaths and whole communities forced to evacuate on moment's notice. That is why local governments must address the wildfire risks associated with building and construction at the front end.

Oakland's history of wildfires is no secret in California, the Oakland firestorm of 1991 was one of the largest urban wildfires in history. The fire started on the border of Oakland and spread throughout the Berkeley hills. Ultimately 25 lives were lost, 150 people were injured, 1,520 acres of land was burned, and thousands of homes were destroyed. The high winds, steep terrain, and heavy fuel load made fighting this historic blaze a major challenge. The economic loss from the fire was estimated at \$1.5 billion.

While all of California is subject to some degree of fire hazard, there are specific features that make some areas more hazardous. CAL FIRE is required by law to map areas of significant fire hazards based on fuels, terrain, weather, and other relevant factors. These zones, referred to as Fire Hazard Severity Zones, influence how people construct buildings and protect property to reduce risk associated with wildland fires. The maps are updated on an ongoing basis to incorporate improved fire science, data, and mapping techniques. Using the latest fire science, CAL FIRE has developed, and field tested a model that serves as the basis of zone assignments. The model evaluates properties using characteristics that affect the probability of the area burning and potential fire behavior in the area. Many factors are considered such as fire history, existing and potential fuel, flame length, blowing embers, terrain, weather, and the likelihood of buildings igniting.

The Fire Hazard Severity Zones identify fire hazard, not fire risk. "Hazard" is based on the physical conditions that give a likelihood that an area will burn over a 30 to 50-year period without considering modifications such as fuel reduction efforts. As a Fire Department, our Command Staff pays very close attention to shifting fire science, climate change, and the topography of our service area. The hazards and risks in play in these high-risk zones keep our

personnel up at night. Eliminating undue risk and hazards in the East Bay hills, such as ADUs, would go a long way to preventing the next major fire related disaster in this region.

The City Council adopted Resolution No. 87940 C.M.S. in response to the increased concerns of the past few seasons. As a response to this concern, the City established a Wildfire Prevention Working Group that meets regularly to both address short term needs and to continue the various long-term strategy planning and implementation. The Wildfire Prevention Working Group consists of the following Departments: Oakland Fire Department (OFD), Oakland Public Works (OPW), Department of Transportation (OakDOT), Bureau of Planning and Building (P&B), Oakland Police Department (OPD), and the City Administrator's Office as convener. The meetings cover a range issues related to immediate fire safety challenges, ongoing hazard mitigation, with a strong emphasis on coordination between departments and nearby jurisdictions, as well as the Oakland community members likely to be most directly impacted by a wildfire in the very high fire hazard severity zone.

As noted in the current draft of the City's Vegetation Management Plan, adding ADUs and creating a higher level of density in the FHSZ and areas known as the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) would pose an adverse fire risk to everyone in those communities, including the very people the new ADUs are designed to house. Current State law allows garages to be converted into ADUs without any off-street parking replacement. If that were to happen in these zones, it would push even more vehicles onto already crowded streets. As the Fire Department partners with the County using new technology, *Zonehaven*, to map evacuation routes for these zones, reducing congestion is of utmost importance. Moreover, additional density will exacerbate the already dangerous vehicle back-up and choke points at intersections that will occur during mass wildfire emergency evacuations. This existing and worsening "bottleneck" issue affects traffic flow and public safety on streets within VHFHSZ regardless of their available road width because multiple roads feed into the same key intersections needed to evacuate. When these key interactions become clogged, no cars can escape, and no emergency vehicles can get through to fight the fire or assist people to escape. In addition, adding new development in these areas will increase the amount of combustible fuel in the area, leading to a higher number of ignition sources and the likelihood of rapid spread of wildfire.

The Oakland Fire Department and the Wildfire Working Group is extremely sensitive to California's housing crisis and support the increases in density that strategically placed ADUs can achieve. However, there is a need to balance that with the very real increase in wildfires that are destroying thousands of housing units each year across California. Your recommendation to create reasonable restrictions on ADUs in the High Fire Severity Zone is a great example of establishing that balance. Now more than ever, Oakland residents and communities throughout the region are looking for their government to take pro-active steps to increase public safety and promote emergency preparedness. A surge in ADU's in the high fire severity zone project will put new and existing residents at risk and may worsen the climate crisis.

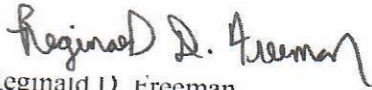
The Oakland Fire Department is fortunate to have built many proactive relationships with our partnering agencies who recognize that strategic and sustained action is necessary to protect the City's infrastructure, preserve life and property and enable the City to prosper without catastrophic loss due to wildfire.

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surge in ADU's in the high fire severity zone project put new and existing residents at risk and may worsen the climate crisis.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Reginald D. Freeman". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Reginald D. Freeman
Fire Chief, Oakland Fire Department
City of Oakland