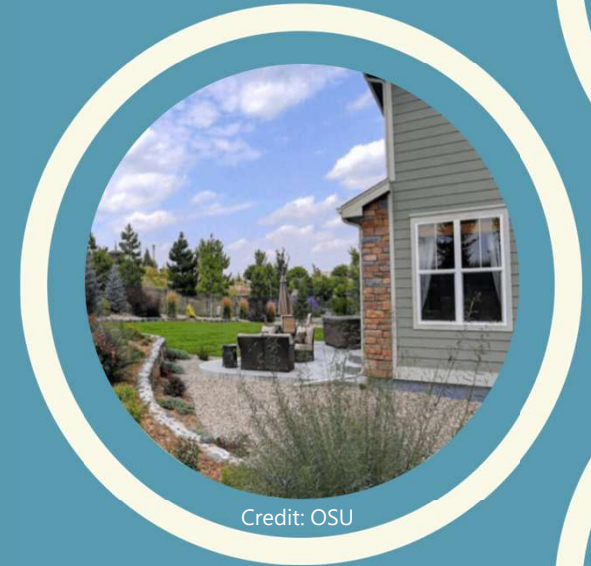


October 14, 2026

Wildfire Resiliency: Defensible Space Code

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Melissa Steele, Deputy Fire Marshal – Wildfire Preparedness



Credit: OSU

Council Goal to Build Community Resilience

Strategy: Build wildfire resiliency through awareness, education and actions that reduce risks, increasing the number of property assessments by 25% over the biennium

- **Action:** Evaluate and update codes to reflect best practices for wildfire resiliency
- **Action:** Coordinate and expand community wildfire resiliency outreach and education



Purpose



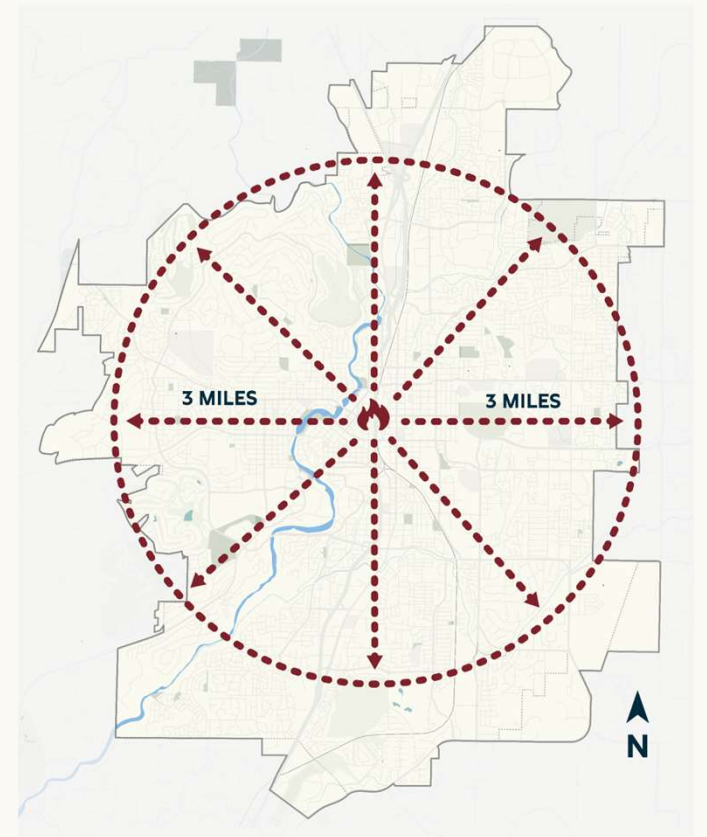
Goal of Today's Discussion

Seeking direction to shape future defensible space policy development:

- How far should the City go in expanding requirements?
- What level of investment is Council willing to consider?
- What role should community engagement play?
- How should future policy balance wildfire science and community practicality?

Before We Dig In...

- Bend is a Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) community
- Home hardening, defensible space, and culture change reduce risk
- Today's discussion is about the City's role in advancing defensible space
- Focus is on defensible space, not home hardening or evacuation
- Seeking policy direction first; detailed implementation analysis comes later



Since the Last Council Discussion in February



Bloomberg Initiative ideation session with City staff

- City adopted R327 (effective May 15), establishing home-hardening requirements for new, detached residential construction
- Oregon State Fire Marshal (OSFM) released finalized state model defensible space code in Spring 2026; not yet adopted by any jurisdiction
- City completed Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative
- 2026 fire season largest on record; over 2.5 million acres

What is Defensible Space?

EO1

- **Ongoing management** of vegetation and other combustible materials around a structure to reduce ignition risk
- **Buffer zone** slows or halts fire from engulfing property, giving firefighters time
- **First 5 feet** around structure ("Immediate Zone") vulnerable to embers and therefore most critical for protecting structure
- Embers responsible for up to 90% of ignitions; **embers can travel up to 3 miles** from main fire



Credit: OSU

Slide 7

EO1

I like the graphic, but it is a little misleading - it relates to the third bullet, not to defensible space. The graphic relates more to a slide with the main theme "we're all in this together" rather than defensible space. Maybe put this graphic on slide 4, and is there a graphic that could show the first 5 feet around a structure on this slide?

Elizabeth Oshel, 2026-10-01T20:46:59.157

Current Defensible Space Efforts

- Increased wildfire risk assessments (491)
- Expansion of Bend's Firewise network (75 sites)
- Own Your Zone campaign
- Community and contractor workshops, homeowners association presentations, preparedness events
- Fuels mitigation partnerships
- Ongoing education and enforcement of Flammable Vegetation Code
- Defensible Space Internal Workgroup



Upcoming Efforts & Initiatives



- Central Oregon Community College (COCC) fuels mitigation program internship
- Pursuing grants (e.g., Healthy Homes Grant)
- Bend-La Pine Schools Partnership
- Leadership Bend Impact Project to advance Bloomberg prototypes
- Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) update
- One-time wildfire vulnerability study and map
- Continued collaboration with insurance underwriters and Division of Financial Regulations

Community Conversations

- Bloomberg research
- Neighborhood roundtables
- Outreach events
- Community survey
- Public comment
- Home assessments
- Council emails

- *How can I hold my neighbor accountable after I have done my part?*
- *Why am I being non-renewed [for insurance], even though I have done defensible space?*
- *I can't afford / don't have time to do defensible space / home hardening*
- *I live in the middle of town, I am not at risk*
- *My neighborhood is Firewise, I am not at risk*

Problem Statement

- Bend's **wildfire risk is increasing** with hotter, drier weather, prolonged drought, and cumulative effects of past land and fire management practices.
- Much of the community's **built environment established under different assumptions** about wildfire.
- The **absence of clear, consistent and widely understood expectations** around defensible space – whether through code, education, or other tools - makes it more difficult to take coordinated action, resulting elevated shared risk.



Image: Chris Larson, KTVZ

Cross-Cutting Considerations



- Not starting from scratch
- Risk is shared
- Not everyone starts from the same place
- Awareness not the primary barrier
- Insurance outside of local control
- Biomass disposal capacity needs further exploration

What Could Defensible Space Code Look Like?

Requirement	New Construction	All Existing Development (including vacant lots)	Property Owner Effort	Cost	Mitigation Impact
Noncombustible fencing (first 5')	✓		•	\$\$	•••
Ember-resistant immediate zone (first 5')	✓	✓	••	\$-\$\$\$	•••
Prohibited tree/plant list (first 5')	✓	✓	••	\$-\$\$	•••
Tree limbing standards		✓	••	\$\$\$	•••
Removal of ladder fuels		✓	••	\$-\$\$	•••
Fuel breaks on lots > 1/2 acre		✓	•••	\$\$	•••
Grass height maintenance		✓	•	\$	•
Firewood storage		✓	•	\$	•••

Currently regulated through Flammable Vegetation Code (Bend Municipal Code 13.30.005)

Compliance Recommendations

- Ongoing support (defensible space not one and done)
- Phased effective dates
- Education before enforcement
- Use data to prioritize resources
- Use self-inspection tools to expand reach
- Limit use of citations
- Proactive > complaint-driven enforcement
- Additional staffing and budget



Example Phasing Strategy

Short-Term (1-2 Years)

- Council goals
- Requirements for new development
- Expand voluntary/education strategies
- Risk data to inform approach
- Evaluate biomass needs
- Pursue grants

Medium-Term (2-5 Years)

- Establish funding source
- Expand staffing
- Expand education, outreach, partnerships, engagement practices
- Self-inspection program
- Citywide requirements, phased effective dates

Long-Term (5+ Years)

- Fully effective defensible space code
- Begin enforcement
- Ongoing funding, education, assistance
- Implement support programs
- Implement biomass strategies
- Program evaluation and updates

COUNCIL DISCUSSION



Council Guidance Requested

Regulatory Scope: How Far Should the City Go?

Incremental



Broad

Resourcing: Level of Investment?

Existing Resources



Expanded Investment

Community Engagement: Role?

Shapes Policy



Informs Implementation

Approach to Standards: Balance of Science & Practicality?

Strict Adherence to
Wildfire Science

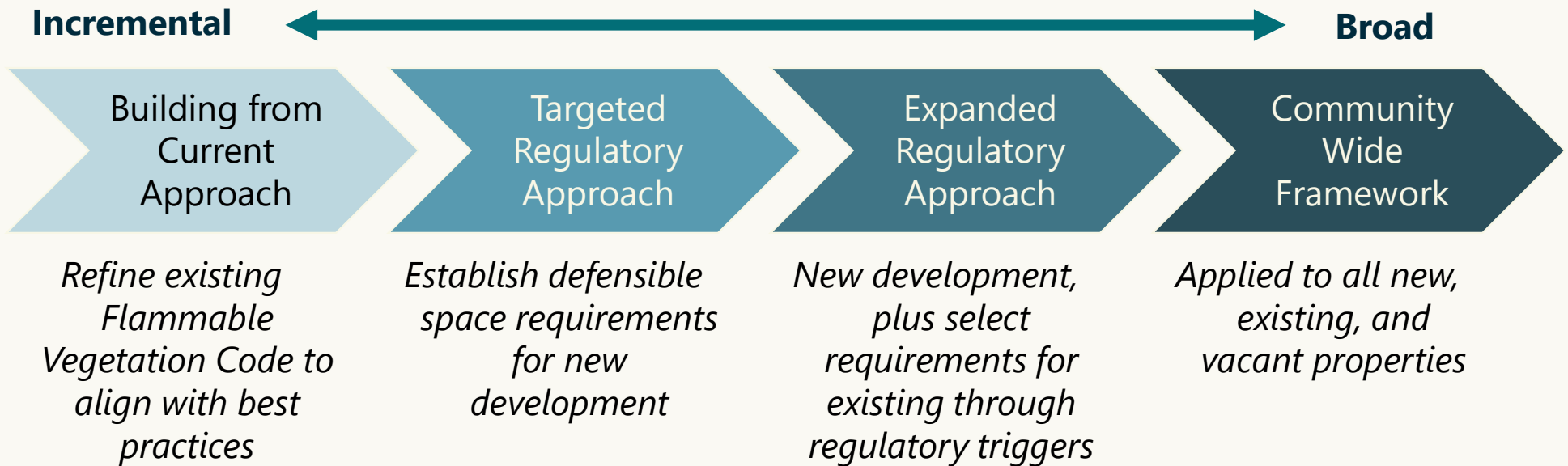


Adjusted for Community
Practicality

Regulatory Scope

KEY QUESTION

How far should the City go in expanding requirements to reduce community wildfire risk?



Regulatory Scope: How Far Should the City Go?

Incremental



Broad

Related Considerations:

- Awareness up, behavior change limited
- Broader the framework, greater the need for sustained funding to support education, assistance, staffing
- New development: gradual, uneven resilience gains; leverages existing processes; new processes still required and may affect timelines; post-occupancy changes unaddressed; aligns with peer cities
- Community-wide framework: broader risk reduction; could affect >40K properties

Resourcing

KEY QUESTION

What level of investment and organizational commitment is Council willing to consider in support of future defensible space efforts?



Leverage Existing Resources

Build on existing staff, programs, and tools; pursue grants for projects; would require reprioritization of existing City work and implementation tradeoffs



Expand Community Investment

Explore dedicated funding; would allow the City to invest in education, technical assistance, compliance, and support programs; more robust and effective implementation model



Resourcing: Level of Investment?

Existing Resources



Expanded Investment

Related Considerations:

- Broader programs require more staffing and support
- No new resources = tradeoffs and reprioritization
- Grant funding uncertain and one-time
- Successful programs take years to mature
- Policy adoption alone rarely changes behavior
- Investment level should match desired outcomes
- Need to balance with other community priorities

Community Engagement

KEY QUESTION

What role should community engagement play in defensible space policy development?



Shapes Policy

Community helps determine policy direction; "what should we do?"



Informs Implementation

Policy informed by wildfire science and best practices; engagement focus on barriers, support needs, and implementation challenges; "how do we do this successfully?"



Community Engagement: Role?

Shapes Policy



Informs Implementation

Related Considerations:

- Substantial engagement through the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative has provided insight into community barriers, motivations, and support needs
- Community engagement approach has timeline and resource implications
- If shaping policy, potential for engagement strategies like Citizen Assembly

Approach to Standards

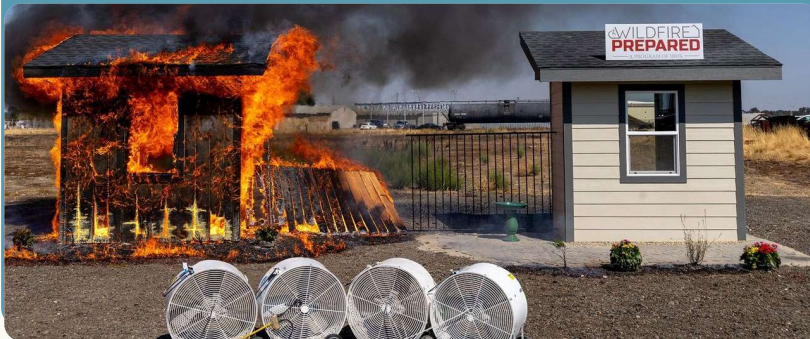
KEY QUESTION

How closely should future policy align with wildfire science when recommendations may be difficult, costly, or unpopular to implement?



Strict Adherence to Wildfire Science

Regulations follow wildfire mitigation research best practices; may require greater costs, property modification, and community and market adaptation



Adjusted for Community Practicality

Balances wildfire science with cost, feasibility, aesthetics, and community readiness; may improve acceptance but reduce effectiveness



Approach: Balance of Science & Practicality?

Strict adherence to wildfire science



Adjusted for community practicality

Related Considerations:

- May change preferences regarding neighborhood character and aesthetics
- Landscaping often reflects personal preferences and carries sentimental value
- Local market supply not yet aligned with emerging best practices
- Time needed for homeowners, contractors, suppliers, and retailers to adapt

Council Guidance Requested

Regulatory Scope: How Far Should the City Go?

Incremental



Broad

Resourcing: Level of Investment?

Existing Resources



Expanded Investment

Community Engagement: Role?

Shapes Policy



Informs Implementation

Approach to Standards: Balance of Science & Practicality?

Strict Adherence to
Wildfire Science



Adjusted for Community
Practicality

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