



**TOWN OF LOS GATOS
COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT**

MEETING DATE: 3/21/2023

ITEM NO: 12

DATE: March 13, 2023
TO: Mayor and Town Council
FROM: Laurel Prevetti, Town Manager
SUBJECT: Receive a Report on Roadside Fire Fuel Reduction (Vegetation Management) (CIP 812-0130) and Provide Direction on 2023 Work Plan

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive a Report on Roadside Fire Fuel Reduction (Vegetation Management) (CIP 812-0130) and Direction on 2023 Work Plan

BACKGROUND:

Chronology of Prior Work

On December 7, 2017, the Federal Emergency Management Agency approved the Santa Clara County Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan (MJHMP). The purpose of this five-year plan to identify, assess, and reduce the long-term risk of hazard events. The MJHMP identified that 24% of the population of the Town of Los Gatos is in Very High Wildfire Severity Zone, particularly along the southern side of the Town. The 2017 plan expired in 2022 and a new plan is currently in development.

In 2019, the Santa Clara County Fire Safe Council developed a County-wide Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). This document sets forth a broad strategy for wildfire management across the County. In the Los Gatos Annex of the CWPP, roadside brush removal and mowing was identified as a mitigation strategy to provide buffers to reduce wildfire ignition and to provide for safe evacuation.

In October 2019, the Town prepared and Town Council adopted the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Evacuation Assessment Report. The WUI is defined as areas where human habitation and development are near the edge or are located within areas dominated by wildland fuels.

PREPARED BY: Nicolle Burnham
Director, Parks and Public Works

Reviewed by: Town Manager, Town Attorney, and Finance Director

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BACKGROUND (continued):

This report evaluated the street network in the WUI on a neighborhood basis and identified the critical roadways for ingress and egress during emergencies.

During 2020, the Town's wildfire mitigation efforts accelerated, with numerous changes the Town code being adopted, numerous budget actions taken to support wildfire mitigation, approval of an Ad Hoc Wildfire Committee's Plan, and, in June 2020, the adoption by Town Council of the [Roadway Vegetation Management Plan](#). The Roadway Vegetation Management Plan identified roadways where hazardous vegetation should be removed within the WUI. (A separate report was prepared to address vegetation in Town-owned Open Space.)

The Roadway Vegetation Management Plan categorized approximately 31 miles of road into Priority Areas (Level 1, 2, or 3) based on the amount of encroachment identified along the road, the type of vegetation, and emergency egress and ingress needs. In general, the goal of vegetation management along roads is to provide 20 feet of clear width and 13.5 feet of clear height so vehicles of most sizes and types (including emergency vehicles) can be accommodated safely. In addition to the width and height requirements, all areas within 10 feet of fire apparatus are required to be cleared of non-fire resistant vegetation.

Priority 1 roads are evacuation routes that were identified as having dense vegetation. Priority 2 roads may or may not be evacuation routes and were identified as having encroachment of dense woodlands and/or flammable non-native invasive species. Priority 3 roads have minimal vegetation encroachment that could increase the intensity of fire and/or increase wildfire spread. Priority 3 roads were identified as not being in need of immediate vegetation management and were recommended for inspection "every few years."

In 2021 and 2022, staff executed contracts for roadway vegetation management on Priority 1 and Priority 2 roads, and some other areas within the Town boundary. In addition, with the support of earmark funding from the State, the Santa Clara County Fire Department (SCCFD) stood up a wildfire team that operates out of Vasona County Park. This team performed some vegetation management efforts in Los Gatos during summer 2022. Attachment 1 defines the Priority 1, 2 and 3 road segments, identifies evacuation route routes, and defines which segments had work completed in 2021 and 2022.

Funding of Vegetation Management Projects

The Town has been successful in competing for federal grants to support its Roadway Vegetation Management Program to support its wildfire protection efforts. Federal grants applied for to date are presented in Table 1.

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BACKGROUND (continued):

Both grants are intended for multiple year project delivery, supporting work for roadway vegetation management during Fiscal Year 2023/24, 2024/25, and beyond. It should be noted that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant covers two phases of work, with Phase I including the development of procurement documents, public outreach and engagement with residents adjacent to the roadway, and the issuance of a Request for Proposals (RFP) for an environmental consultant to provide environmental oversight and permitting assistance. The completion of Phase 1 Scope of Work must be done no later than January 25, 2024, with deliverables and reimbursement claims due February 9, 2024. Once Phase 1 has been submitted, the Town will await confirmation from FEMA of an obligation for Phase 2 and at that time will work on the implementation phase to prepare an RFP for hiring a contractor to conduct the vegetation management scope of work.

Table 1
Summary of Roadway Vegetation Management Funding to Date

Granting Agency	Grant Designation	Total Project Amount	Grant Agency Share	Town Required Match
FEMA	DR4569 Los Gatos Hazardous Fuel Reduction - Roadways	\$1,963,169	\$1,472,377	\$490,792
	Phase 1	\$36,750	\$28,000	\$8,750
	Phase 2	\$1,926,419	\$1,444,377	\$482,042
USDA Forest Service	Fuels Reduction Project -Roadways	\$1,500,000	\$750,000	\$750,000
TOTALS		\$3,463,169	\$2,222,377	\$1,240,792

For both grants the match can be in the form of budget allocations or staff time for grant administration, development of the work plans, preparation of bid documents and field oversight of the work performed.

DISCUSSION:

In summer and fall of 2023, staff will continue the roadway vegetation management program. The current work plan calls for continuing work in Priority 1 and 2 roadways, and if funds permit, Priority 3 evacuation routes. Field inspection of the Priority 1 and 2 roadways where vegetation management was completed in 2021 and 2022 has revealed that these areas may

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DISCUSSION (continued):

require annual or bi-annual management. In other words, vegetation cleared in prior years has re-grown such that some areas do not meet the 20 feet wide, 13.5 high clearance goal.

In January 2023, winter storms revealed roadway vulnerabilities of a different type in relation to tree fall. Specifically, on Overlook Road two eucalyptus trees fell, blocking the roadway. An arborist report, provided by property owners along Overlook Road is presented in Attachment 2. This report indicates a need to remove these trees and staff does not dispute the finding of the report.

Eucalyptus globulus (commonly known as Tasmanian Blue Gum Eucalyptus) were planted extensively in California and thrive in the coastal climate. The National Park Service completed a study of these trees entitled "[Eucalyptus: A Complex Challenge Fire Management, Resource Protection and the Legacy of Tasmanian Blue Gum](#)" that describes the fire hazard of these trees as follows:

Constant shedding of bark is part of what makes these trees a fire hazard. The bark catches fire readily, and the loose strips tend to carry fire up into the canopy, casting embers outward. Despite the presence of volatile oils that can produce a hot fire, leaves of blue gum eucalyptus are classed as intermediate in fire resistance when green, and juvenile leaves are highly resistant to flaming.

Eighteen eucalyptus trees remain on Overlook Road. Removal and disposal of these trees and their stumps is estimated to cost \$270,000 to \$306,000 (\$15,000 to \$17,000 per tree). This price is based on the height and diameter of the trees and their proximity to structures. The annual General Fund allocation Town-wide for tree removal and management is \$100,000. Normally, removal of trees would require the replacement trees be planted. The cost of replacement street trees is not included in the cost noted above.

Overlook Road is identified as a Priority 3 area for roadway vegetation management. This is due to the high canopy of these trees and the limited fire hazard they present if the bark litter is regularly managed.

Throughout the Town of Los Gatos, the ownership of roadways varies. In some cases, the Town owns the land on which roads are located. In other areas, the underlying land is owned by a private entity and the Town has an easement over the road to allow for public use. Overlook Road was transferred to the Town as part of an annexation that occurred many years ago. Staff is still reviewing property records to verify who owns Overlook Road and also who may have planted the eucalyptus trees.

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DISCUSSION (continued):

In addition to Overlook Road, community members from other areas have contacted staff requesting the removal of certain trees (eucalyptus and other species) along other roadways (e.g., College, Hilow, etc.). Staff plans to focus on the roadways identified in the Roadway Vegetation Management Plan and does not propose proactive removal of roadside trees in areas not identified as a Priority.

For 2023 staff proposes to complete: 1) up to \$750,000 in vegetation management work in accordance with the USDA grant; and 2) complete the Phase 1 work required per the FEMA grant. Completing the \$750,000 in vegetation management work is predicated on the Town allocating the \$750,000 match in the proposed Capital Budget.

Staff is currently developing its work plan for the 2023 roadway vegetation management program. The final work plan is heavily dependent on whether Town Council would like to direct use of the available grant funding to removal of the Eucalyptus on Overlook Road.

CONCLUSION:

Staff is working to identify priorities for the 2023 roadway vegetation management workplan. The work plan would normally focus on Priority 1 and 2 roadways as identified in the Roadway Vegetation Management. Staff looks forward to Council's direction on whether the Overlook Road eucalyptus trees or other trees should be included in this year's work plan.

COORDINATION:

This report was coordinated with the Town Attorney, Town Manager, and Finance Director.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Staff is seeking direction about the use of funds that are allocated through the Capital Budget process. The action requested in this report has no direct fiscal impact.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT:

This is not a project defined under CEQA, and no further action is required. Appropriate clearances will be secured when the proposed work becomes a project as defined under CEQA.

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Attachments:

1. Roadway Vegetation Management Plan Priority Road List
2. Arborist Report for Overlook Road Eucalyptus Trees
3. Public Comments