TOWN OF LOS GATOS

COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

MEETING DATE: 12/16/2025

ITEM NO: 17

DATE: December 16, 2025

TO: Mayor and Town Council

FROM: Chris Constantin, Town Manager

SUBJECT: **Discuss, Consider, and Provide Direction Regarding Wildfire Risk Mitigation Program Options, Planning Level Cost Estimates, and Emergency Management Initiatives Update**

RECOMMENDATION: Discuss, Consider, and Provide Direction Regarding Wildfire Risk Mitigation Program Options, Planning Level Cost Estimates, and Emergency Management Initiatives Update

FISCAL IMPACT:

This item does not commit the Town to specific expenditures. It provides planning-level cost ranges for potential wildfire mitigation and preparedness program elements to support Council discussion of investment levels and program priorities.

Based on the cost ranges in Attachments 1 and 2, the three illustrative program scenarios have approximate annual operating costs of:

• Scenario 1 Foundational Program: about $1.1 to $1.15 million per year, plus an estimated $0.8 to $1.0 million in one-time or capital work over 5 to 10 years.

• Scenario 2 Intermediate Program: about $1.6 to $2.3 million per year, plus an estimated $3 to $5 million in one-time or capital investments over 5 to 10 years.

• Scenario 3 Comprehensive Program: about $2.1 to $3.0 million per year, plus an estimated $6 to $11 million or more in cumulative one-time and capital work over 5 to 10 years.

These figures are order-of-magnitude planning estimates in current-year dollars and do not include grant offsets. Successful external funding would reduce the Town's net cost. More detailed assumptions for each element appear in the body of the report and in Attachments 1 and 2.

PREPARED BY: Chris Todd
Emergency Manager

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

STRATEGIC PRIORITY:

These efforts align with the strategic priority to further the Town's emergency preparedness, resiliency, and response capabilities, particularly in the area of wildfire risk.

BACKGROUND:

In recent years, the Town of Los Gatos has experienced increasing wildfire risk due to the 2020–2022 drought, fuel accumulation, and climate driven changes in fire behavior. At the same time, the Town has made significant progress in emergency planning, including adoption of an updated Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP), expansion of roadside vegetation management, and initiation of Town wide evacuation and wildfire modeling.

In alignment with the Town Council's strategic priority to "Further the Town's emergency preparedness, resiliency, and response capabilities, particularly in the area of wildfire risk," staff have developed a set of program options and planning level cost estimates to help the Council consider the scale and scope of a future, more comprehensive wildfire mitigation program. This report focuses on public safety measures and Town level preparedness and continuity, including Emergency Operations Center (EOC) capabilities. It does not evaluate operational staffing needs or response capabilities of the Police Department or the Santa Clara County Fire Department.

To develop the program options and cost ranges, staff drew on multiple sources:

- The Santa Clara County Multi Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan (MJHMP) and the Town of Los Gatos Local Hazard Mitigation Plan Annex / Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), the Town of Los Gatos Ad Hoc Wildfire Committee Report (2020), and community input, which together identify wildfire, earthquake, and flooding as the Town's top natural hazards;
- Budget and program information from comparable wildland urban interface communities, including Truckee, CA (voter approved Measure T wildfire resilience investments), Montecito, CA, and Sonoma County's Wildfire Adapted program; and
- Fire Smart community pilots supported by the Tahoe Fund and partners.

While these communities differ in size and governance structure, they provide useful per resident and per acre benchmarks for the level of investment that may be appropriate for Los Gatos, given its approximately 33,500 residents and roughly 12 square miles of primarily residential development with significant hillside WUI exposure.

For context:

- Los Gatos, CA – approx. 33,500 residents; ~12 square miles (~7,500 acres); primarily residential, with steep WUI hillsides directly upslope of denser in town neighborhoods.

- Truckee, CA – approx. 17,380 residents; 34 square miles (~21,540 acres); roughly half the population of Los Gatos but about twice the land area, with extensive forested WUI and access constraints.

- Montecito, CA – approx. 8,600 residents; 9.18 square miles (~5,875 acres); somewhat smaller in land area and about one quarter of Los Gatos' population, but facing high consequence wildfire, debris flow, and evacuation challenges similar to Los Gatos' hillside neighborhoods.

Taken together, these comparisons suggest that a robust wildfire program for Los Gatos would reasonably fall within the per resident and per acre investment ranges seen in these communities, adjusted for local labor, contracting, and administrative costs.

DISCUSSION:

1. Risk Context and Key Hazards

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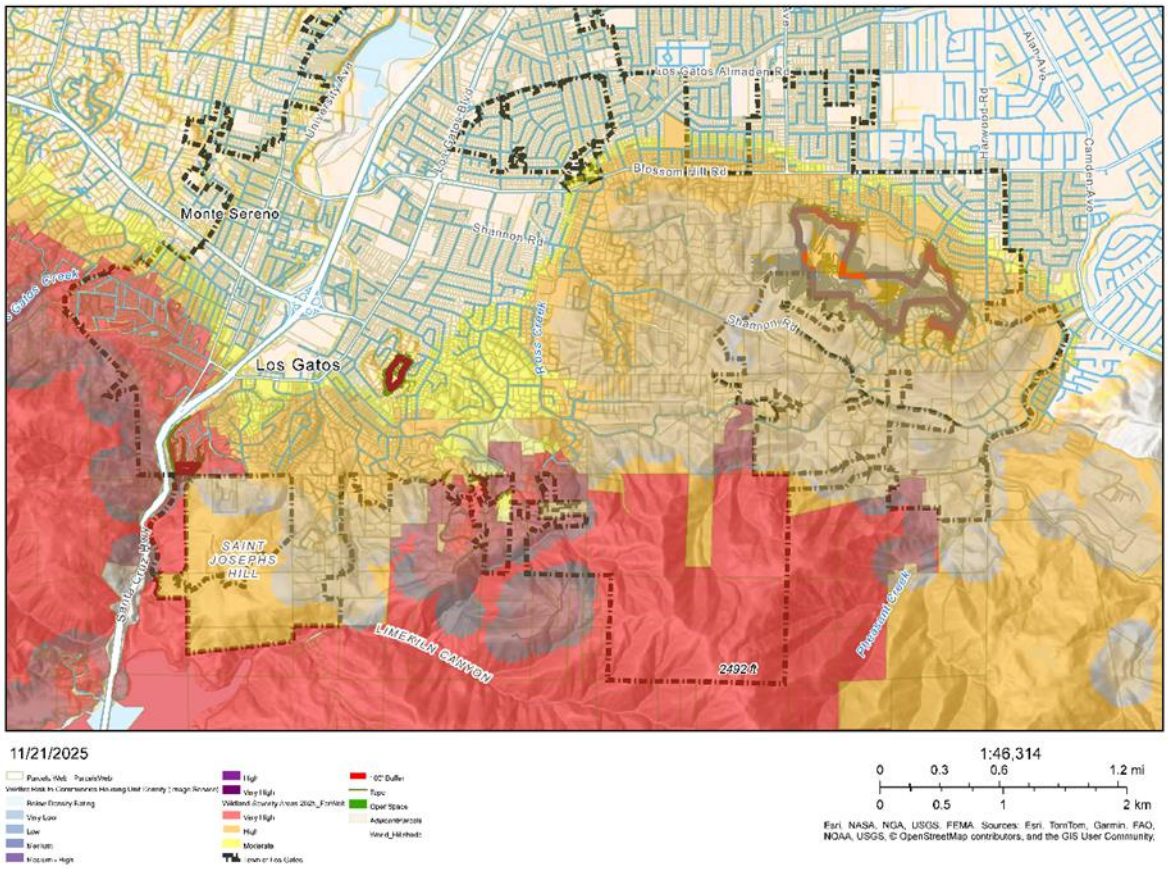
Wildfire Hazard Map with Housing Density



For Los Gatos, wildfire is the primary focus of this report. While the Town also faces significant earthquake and flood/storm hazards, the specific program options and costs presented here are oriented toward wildfire mitigation and preparedness, with co-benefits for other hazards. Within the wildfire hazard, staff identify three key mechanisms of fire spread:

1. Vegetation-to-Structure Ignition at the WUI Boundary
    - Dense, continuous fuels on steep hillsides or in canyons adjacent to homes can create conditions for rapid fire spread from wildland vegetation to structures.
    - Narrow winding roads, limited access, and slope can accelerate fire behavior and complicate firefighting and evacuation.
2. Structure-to-Structure Fire Spread as Spacing Narrows
    - As development transitions from large hillside lots to more closely spaced homes, the dominant hazard shifts from wildland fuels to structure-to-structure ignition.

    - In these areas, combustible fencing, vegetation between homes, deck attachments, and vulnerable building materials can allow a single ignition to propagate rapidly through a block or neighborhood.
3. Ember Cast Affecting the Wider Town Area
    - Large wildfires can generate ember casts capable of igniting homes and vegetation miles away from the flame front, including in denser in-town neighborhoods that are not directly adjacent to wildland fuels.
    - This means that preparing hillside homes alone is not sufficient; embers can ignite structures, vehicles, and landscaping well inside the Town core.

Across all three mechanisms, evacuation is a compounding factor rather than a separate hazard. Limited roadway capacity, topography, and multi-directional threat potential (e.g., multiple canyons and ridge lines) can slow evacuation just as demand is highest. This underscores the need to reduce the likelihood and intensity of fire reaching homes (fuel reduction and home hardening); reduce the chance that individual ignitions become neighborhood-scale events (defensible space and structure spacing considerations); and improve evacuation planning, public warning, and continuity of Town operations.
These wildfire-focused efforts will also improve preparedness for other natural hazards (e.g., earthquakes, floods, severe storms) by strengthening emergency management capacity, communication tools, and continuity planning.

2. Program Objectives

The proposed approach is organized around three overarching objectives:

1. **Life Safety**
   Reducing risk of injury and improving egress in a disaster.
2. **Property and Economic Stability**
   Protect homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure in a way that maintains the long-term viability and economic stability of the community. This includes protecting the local tax base, avoiding long-term displacement, and preserving key public facilities and lifelines.
3. **Environmental Stewardship**
   Manage vegetation and fuels in a way that reduces wildfire risk while supporting ecological health, watershed function, and long-term resilience of the Town's open spaces and urban forest.

To achieve these objectives, the program is designed to address mitigation, response, and continuity:

- **Mitigation**: Vegetation management, home hardening, defensible space, and infrastructure improvements that reduce risk before an event.

- **Response**: Strengthening the Town's ability to coordinate multi-agency operations through the EOC, public warning, and field support.
- **Continuity**: Ensuring the Town can sustain essential services and governance during and after a major event through continuity of operations planning.

Whole Community and Resident Action
A central premise of the program is that the Town cannot "do it all" on public property alone:

- A large portion of the highest-risk WUI area in and around Los Gatos is on private property, with Town-owned land representing only a subset of the fuels that threaten structures and evacuation routes.
- The preparedness of hillside homes directly affects the safety of residents farther into Town. If fires intensify in the WUI, embers and structure-to-structure spread will drive risk into denser neighborhoods.

Accordingly, the Town can:

- **Educate** residents and businesses with clear, consistent guidance on home hardening, defensible space, and evacuation readiness.
- **Reduce barriers to action** by offering services such as chipping, greenwaste pick-up, and potentially block-level contracts that lower cost and complexity for individual property owners.
- **Guide through non-punitive inspections** where appropriate, emphasizing coaching and voluntary compliance over penalties, especially in early phases.
- **Enforce minimum standards** for vegetation management and hazard abatement when necessary, in a fair and transparent manner.

The intent is to build a program that is robust enough to handle both moderate disasters and the less frequent, but larger-scale events that would significantly stress Town resources, without over-committing to a single hazard scenario.

3. Wildfire Mitigation and Preparedness Program Options and Cost Scenarios
Based on the cost outlined in Attachments 1 and 2, the three illustrative program scenarios have approximate operating costs of:

Scenario 1 – Foundational Program: Approximately **$1.1 to $1.15 million per year** in ongoing operating costs, with an estimated **$0.8 to $1.0 million** in additional one-time and capital work over the first 5–10+ years.

Scenario 2 – Intermediate Program: Approximately **$1.6 to $2.3 million per year** in ongoing operating costs, with an estimated **$3 to $5 million** in one-time and capital investments over the first 5–10+ years.

Scenario 3 – Comprehensive Program: Approximately **$2.1 to $3.0 million per year** in ongoing operating costs, with an estimated **$6 to $11+ million** in cumulative one-time and capital work over the first 5–10+ years.

This section describes how potential wildfire mitigation and preparedness components could be combined into three illustrative levels of investment:

- **Scenario 1 – Foundational Program**
- **Scenario 2 – Intermediate Program**
- **Scenario 3 – Comprehensive Program**

Each scenario builds on the prior one (Intermediate includes all Foundational elements; Comprehensive includes all Intermediate and Foundational elements). The program elements listed under each scenario are examples of how those funding levels could be deployed; individual elements could be modified, blended, or phased while staying within similar overall cost ranges.

As noted in the Fiscal Impact section, all costs are order-of-magnitude planning estimates in current-year dollars, do not assume specific grant awards or offsets, and exclude capital and match funding already appropriated for the outdoor warning siren project, the Town-wide evacuation modeling study, and the Vegetation Management Plan (VMP) update. Detailed line items and assumptions for each program component are provided in Attachment 1 – Wildfire Risk Mitigation Cost Breakdown and Attachment 2 – Wildfire Risk Mitigation Cost Table.

Scenario 1 – Foundational Program
(Estimated annual operating cost: approximately $1.1–$1.15 million; one-time/capital over ~5–10+ years: approximately $0.8–$1.0 million)

A core, sustainable wildfire mitigation and preparedness program that stabilizes and modestly enhances recurring fuels work, resident support, and EOC readiness, with a focus on the highest-risk locations. It begins transitioning from one-time, grant-funded projects toward a predictable baseline of annual work.

Illustrative annual program elements and costs
(rounded figures; one possible mix within the overall Scenario 1 range):

- **Roadside vegetation management on priority evacuation routes – approx. $375,000/year**
  Shift from one-time, grant-funded roadside projects to modest but consistent annual maintenance on the highest-priority evacuation routes (for example, a multi-year cycle with lighter annual/biannual touch-up on the most constrained segments).

- **Weed abatement, defensible space alignment, and Firewise/community outreach – approx. $200,000/year**
  Maintain and better coordinate:
  • Town support for County weed abatement and defensible space inspections (including the County Weed Abatement program fee billed to the Town); and
  • Ongoing Firewise-style outreach, mailers, and neighborhood engagement to help residents understand expectations and how to meet them.
- **Open space and park fuel treatments on Town lands – approx. $175,000/year**
  Maintain recent fuels work and modestly expand treatments in Town-owned open spaces that most directly threaten WUI neighborhoods, at a scale of approximately 75-100 acres per year, assuming maintenance-level costs in the roughly $1,500–$2,500 per acre range and a mix of follow-up and limited new treatments.
- **Program staffing – approx. $250,000/year**
  Provide roughly 0.5–0.75 FTE equivalent to coordinate baseline wildfire work, manage contracts, track data, and pursue grants. The lower end of the range reflects minimal new staffing and a basic training calendar; the upper end assumes a more regular exercise schedule and modest backfill/overtime for participating staff.
- **Staff training and EOC readiness — approx. $75,000–$100,000/year**
  Annual ICS/EOC training, periodic exercises, VEOCI platform maintenance, and backfill costs.
- **VMP annual implementation support — approx. $50,000/year**
  Ongoing monitoring, adaptive management, and coordination with roadside and open-space fuel treatments (one-time plan update funded separately).

Illustrative one-time/capital work
(approximately **$0.8–$1.0 million total** over 5–10+ years):

- Targeted backlog reduction on roadside and open-space units that directly affect evacuation routes and adjacent structures – on the order of $600,000–$700,000 in initial “catch-up” fuel-reduction work. This planning-level figure is derived by applying typical per-mile and per-acre treatment costs (for a limited number of high-priority WUI road segments and adjacent slopes) and will be refined once the updated Vegetation Management Plan and Town-wide evacuation study identify specific roads and treatment units.
- **Early urban-forest hazard-tree work** along critical evacuation corridors – approximately $0.2–$0.3 million, coordinated with the Town’s Urban Forest Management Plan update and existing street-tree maintenance efforts.

(Work on the Town-wide evacuation modeling study, the Vegetation Management Plan update, the Urban Forest Management Plan update, and the outdoor warning siren project is funded separately and not included in these one-time figures.)

Scenario 2 – Intermediate Program
(Estimated annual operating cost: approximately $1.6–$2.3 million; one-time/capital over ~5–10+ years: approximately $3–$5 million)
A moderate, Town-wide wildfire resilience program that builds on existing efforts and Scenario 1 by expanding fuels work and adding more robust resident support, while remaining within a mid-range level of annual investment.

Illustrative annual program elements and costs
(Scenario 2 includes all Foundational functions, scaled up where noted; one reasonable mix totals about $2.0 million per year):

- **Roadside vegetation management – approx. $425,000/year**
  Increase miles treated on key evacuation routes and begin moving the highest-risk corridors toward an annual maintenance model, while maintaining a multi-year cycle elsewhere.
- **Weed abatement, defensible space support, Firewise outreach, and Town-wide preparedness campaigns – approx. $300,000/year**
  Sustain County weed abatement and defensible-space coordination and add more proactive Town communication and education, including Firewise support, workshops, and multi-channel preparedness campaigns.
- **Open space and park fuel treatments – approx. $75,000/year**
  Continue and modestly expand fuel treatments in additional priority Town-owned open-space and park areas, informed by the updated VMP, CWPP, and evacuation analysis.
- **Chipping and curbside greenwaste service focused on WUI neighborhoods – approx. $325,000/year**
  Provide seasonal chipping/curbside greenwaste service in high-risk WUI areas (for example, one or two collection windows per year), reducing barriers for residents to complete defensible-space work.
- **Home-hardening and defensible-space grants – approx. $225,000/year**
  Launch a starter grant or cost-share program targeting high-risk hillside blocks (for example, roughly 75–100 homes per year at typical awards of $2,000–$3,000, potentially braided with external grants).
- **Community wildfire grants (block/HOA/partner projects) – approx. $250,000/year**
  Fund a small annual pool to support neighborhood-scale mitigation projects (for example, shared access-road clearing, hazard-tree removal in common areas, or HOA-level treatments) where private parcels jointly influence evacuation or structure-ignition risk.

- **Program staffing – approx. $300,000/year**
  Ensure at least one dedicated wildfire-program manager FTE equivalent, to coordinate baseline wildfire work, manage contracts, track data, and pursue grants.
- **Advanced wildfire-risk modeling and GIS support – approx. $50,000/year**
  Add parcel- and corridor-level wildfire-risk and ember-exposure mapping, data maintenance, and support for more targeted programs (for example, using modeling outputs to focus grants and chipping on the highest-risk clusters).

Illustrative one-time/capital work
(approximately $3–$5 million total over 5–10+ years):

- **Open-space backlog reduction and shaded fuel breaks** – Approximately $1.0–$1.5 million in additional treatments beyond Scenario 1, creating and maintaining strategic shaded fuel breaks and treated units on Town lands.
- **Urban-forest hazard-tree work** along priority evacuation routes and hillside streets – approximately $1.0–$1.5 million, initiating early phases of a 12-year tree cycle in the most critical corridors.
- **Initial low- to moderate-cost evacuation-route improvements** – Approximately $1.0–$2.0 million for projects such as shoulder improvements, turnouts, parking restrictions, striping, and signage, guided by the evacuation-modeling study.

Scenario 3 – Comprehensive Program
(Estimated annual operating cost: approximately $2.1–$3.0 million; one-time/capital over ~5–10+ years: approximately $6–$11 million+)
A fully integrated, whole-community wildfire mitigation and emergency-preparedness program broadly comparable to leading California WUI communities, with robust support for residents and strong Town capabilities. Scenario 3 includes all Scenario 1 and 2 elements at higher service levels.

Illustrative annual program elements and costs
(Scenario 3 assumes higher service levels for all preceding elements; one reasonable mix totals about $2.6–$2.7 million per year):

- **Roadside vegetation management – approx. $475,000/year**
  Provide annual or biannual treatments across all priority evacuation routes, maintaining low fuel loads and visibility in the most constrained segments.
- **Weed abatement, defensible-space support, Firewise outreach, and Town-wide preparedness campaigns – approx. $350,000/year**
  Sustain a mature defensible-space/weed-abatement program plus ongoing, high-touch Firewise and preparedness outreach across both hillside and in-town neighborhoods.

- **Open space and park fuel treatments – approx. $100,000/year**
  Maintain and expand a connected network of treated open-space units and fuel breaks wherever Town lands materially influence structure risk or evacuation routes.
- **Chipping and curbside greenwaste service – approx. $450,000/year**
  Offer a fully built-out chipping/greenwaste program for WUI areas, with predictable annual service windows and sufficient capacity to support neighborhood-scale mitigation.
- **Home-hardening and defensible-space grants – approx. $325,000/year**
  Operate a substantial grant/rebate program capable of driving neighborhood-scale change each year (for example, several hundred homes over multiple years), potentially in partnership with regional or State funding.
- **Community wildfire grants (block/HOA/partner projects) – approx. $500,000/year**
  Fund a robust community-grant program comparable in scale to Truckee's Community Wildfire Prevention Grants, supporting larger block, HOA, and partner projects that align with evacuation-modeling and risk-mapping priorities.
- **Program staffing – approx. $450,000/year**
  Support a fully staffed wildfire/emergency-management program (for example, the Emergency Manager plus a dedicated wildfire program manager and partial grant-management capacity), together with frequent EOC exercises, continuity-of-operations planning, and multi-year project management.
- **Advanced wildfire-risk modeling and GIS support – approx. $75,000/year**
  Maintain sophisticated wildfire-risk and ember-exposure modeling, parcel-level tracking of mitigation work, and public-facing risk-communication tools, building on the Town's evacuation-modeling and VMP outputs.

Illustrative one-time/capital work
(approximately **$6–$11 million+ total** over 5–10+ years):

- **12-year urban-forest tree-cycle implementation** – approximately $3.5–$4.5 million to carry out a full hazard-tree and maintenance cycle on priority street trees and trees affecting evacuation routes and structures.
- **Expanded strategic fuel breaks and open-space backlog reduction** – Approximately $2.0–$3.0 million to construct and maintain a network of shaded fuel breaks and treated units on Town lands that most directly influence structure and evacuation risk.
- **Major evacuation-route capital improvements** – Approximately $1.0–$4.0 million for a significant portion of the long-term roadway-improvement program recommended by evacuation modeling (for example, targeted roadway widening, additional turnouts, retaining walls, and other larger-scale projects).

4. Current Emergency Preparedness Initiatives Update
At Council's request, the summary of current emergency preparedness initiatives since the

update provided on September 16, 2025, is presented here to emphasize that the proposed program options build on existing work.

Key ongoing initiatives include:

- Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)
    - The Town's updated EOP has been formally adopted by the Town Council, and staff continues to develop supporting emergency specific annexes.
- Wildfire and Evacuation Modeling
    - The Town is in the process of developing a town-wide evacuation plan informed by simulation-based modeling, with an estimated contract value of approximately $300,000.
- Outdoor Warning Siren System
    - Staff have submitted a FEMA HMPG grant application for a siren-based public warning system. No dates have been given for award determination.
- Urban Forest Management Plan Update and Vegetation Management Plan (VMP) Update
    - Updates to the Urban Forest Management and Vegetation Management Plans are planned to help align with wildfire risk reduction goals.
    - Initial application for State Fire Capacity Grant to fund VMP update has been denied and resubmitted.
- Virtual Emergency Operations Center (VEOCI)
    - The Town has adopted VEOCI as a virtual EOC platform to support multi-agency coordination.
    - Staff are exploring an expansion of VEOCI's use to include Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP), enabling stronger integration between emergency response and sustained service delivery during disruptions.
- Staff Training
    - Continued training for staff in EOC and emergency operations.
- Firewise Community Development
    - Staff have continued to support the development of Firewise Communities through outreach and coordination. We currently have six Firewise Communities in development for Los Gatos.
- Sierra Azule Drive and Sky Lane Emergency Egress
    - Staff are coordinating with residents and the Santa Clara County Fire Vasona Crew to remove vegetation on a Town right-of-way that connects Sierra Azule Drive and Sky Lane. This work will support emergency egress during the Shannon Road repair. Initial vegetation removal costs will be split with Vasona Crew, with the Town's share at $1700.
- Santa Clara County Training Coordination
    - In coordination with the County, in November, the Town hosted a disaster finance section class with emergency personnel from across the county.

These existing efforts provide a strong foundation; the proposed program options are intended to build on this base, not start from zero.

CONCLUSION:

Wildfire remains the Town's most consequential natural hazard, with the potential to impact life safety, economic stability, and environmental health across the community. The Town has already taken important steps to improve its preparedness. However, given evolving risk and community expectations, Council direction is needed on:

1. Which program elements and services should be prioritized for further development; and
2. The general level of investment the Town should consider as staff refine program options and funding strategies.

The planning-level cost scenarios outlined in this report exceed the Town's currently available emergency management allocation and would require a combination of future budget decisions and external funding to implement.
This report, together with the attached cost matrix and the accompanying Council presentation, is intended to support that discussion and help the Town chart a path toward a sustainable, effective wildfire mitigation and preparedness program.

Staff will continue to provide updates to Council on emergency management and the expenditure of the emergency management allocation through the Town Manager's updates. Items that require Council approval or authority will be brought for Council's consideration accordingly.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT:

This is not a project defined under CEQA, and no further action is required.

Attachments:
1. Wildfire Risk Mitigation Cost Breakdown
2. Wildfire Risk Mitigation Cost Table
3. Wildfire Risk Mitigation Presentation