



BUSINESS OF THE CITY COUNCIL CITY OF MERCER ISLAND

AB 6445
April 16, 2024
Study Session

AGENDA BILL INFORMATION

TITLE:	AB 6445: Wildland Fire Preparedness Study Session	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion Only
RECOMMENDED ACTION:	Receive report. No action necessary.	<input type="checkbox"/> Action Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Motion <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinance <input type="checkbox"/> Resolution

DEPARTMENT:	Police
STAFF:	Ed Holmes, Police Chief Amanda Keverkamp, Emergency Manager Greg Bawden, Eastside Fire and Rescue Jeromy Hicks, Eastside Fire and Rescue
COUNCIL LIAISON:	n/a
EXHIBITS:	n/a
CITY COUNCIL PRIORITY:	n/a

AMOUNT OF EXPENDITURE	\$ n/a
AMOUNT BUDGETED	\$ n/a
APPROPRIATION REQUIRED	\$ n/a

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the increase in high-profile wildfires in Washington State and beyond, questions have been raised about the likelihood of a wildfire on Mercer Island and the City’s ability to respond to it. This agenda bill and presentation will examine:

- Wildfire risk on Mercer Island
- Eastside Fire & Rescue (EFR) wildfire response capabilities
- Reducing wildfire risk
- Emergency preparedness tools
- City communications during disasters

BACKGROUND

Recent high-profile wildfires in the Lahaina community in Maui, the 2018 Camp Fire in California, and the February 2024 Texas wildfires which burned over a million acres, bring attention to the importance of community and personal emergency preparedness.

The Evergreen State is no exception. In 2020, the Cold Springs Canyon and Pearl Hill Fires in Okanogan and

Douglas Counties burned over 410,000 acres of land, resulting in one casualty. While the vast majority of large or fast-spreading wildfires in Washington occur on the eastern and traditionally drier side of the state, Mercer Island endeavors to prepare for any and all possible disasters – including wildfires.

ISSUE/DISCUSSION

WILDFIRE RISK ON MERCER ISLAND

The United States is beginning to see a trend in more frequent wildfires.¹ On the western side of the Cascade Mountains, Washingtonians have enjoyed historically low wildfire risk and smaller, slow-moving fires.

Traditionally, what would be considered a large fire on the western side of the Cascades would be quite a bit smaller than the wildfires Eastern Washington sees. Numerically speaking, Western Washington would see an 80-acre fire vs. 1,000s of acres burned on the eastern side of the mountains. Recently, however, the westside has seen fires that are beginning to challenge these traditional assumptions.

- **Sumner Grade Fire.** Over Labor Day weekend in 2020, electrical equipment sparked a fire along State Route 410, which spread quickly due to dry, windy conditions through the Cascade/Enumclaw gap. The fast-spreading fire prompted Level 3 evacuations and burned 800 acres including 4 homes.
- **Bolt Creek Fire.** Over Labor Day weekend two years later, a fire started along King and Snohomish County lines and burned over 12,000 acres. The fire was human-caused, and spread quickly due to steep terrain, strong east winds, and a remote, rugged wilderness that limited firefighting measures.
- **Lahaina Fire.** While not Washington, another recent wildfire that challenges traditional assumptions is the Lahaina/Maui fire in August of 2023. The area was under a red flag warning and the fire was fueled by neglected, overgrown, and dried-out invasive vegetation; and downslope, hurricane-force, sustained winds nearing 80 mph. Additionally, many of the homes and buildings were closely spaced and built before modern codes. Scarcity of water, for both irrigation and firefighting, also contributed to the fast-burning fire which burned over 2,100 acres, left 100 people dead, and thousands homeless.

Mercer Island’s healthy, well-maintained vegetation, location-moderated temperature due to Lake Washington, geographical profile that allows firefighters access for fire suppression, and adopted modern building codes lowers wildfire risk as compared to the examples above.

Unlike the Sumner Grade and Bolt Creek fire areas, Mercer Island also has very little area that would be considered Wildland-Urban Interface. The Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) are areas where wildlands and human development and structures meet or intermix. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) defines wildlands as any area with more than 50% burnable vegetated cover, and includes not only forests, but grasslands, sagebrush-steppe, and other vegetation.

While Mercer Island’s wildfire risk is low for the reasons listed above, it is always important to be able to put out a fire quickly and effectively. This is where Eastside Fire & Rescue (EFR)² comes in.

¹ Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). [Climate Change Indicators: Wildfires](#). (2024, February).

² In 2023, the Mercer Island City Council approved an [interlocal agreement with Eastside Fire & Rescue](#) to provide fire and emergency medical services on Mercer Island. Eastside Fire & Rescue began providing Mercer Island’s fire and emergency medical services on January 1, 2024.

EASTSIDE FIRE & RESCUE WILDFIRE RESPONSE CAPABILITIES

All 220 EFR firefighters are wildfire trained (also known as a Red Card) with 53 firefighters on a specialized wildfire team. The EFR Wildland Team was founded in 1994 and is recognized as one of the largest, well-equipped, well-trained wildland teams in the state.

Wildland Team members regularly deploy to major fires in Eastern Washington and beyond affording the team practical, hands-on experience they would not normally acquire in Western Washington. EFR firefighters and apparatus mobilize to large wildfires throughout the state, Oregon, California, and across the country.

The EFR Wildland Team trains and works collaboratively with neighboring fire departments, and state and federal agencies responsible for responding to wildland fires including the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the United States Forest Service (USFS). Crews are trained and prepared to draft water from lakes and pools as safety allows. EFR crews are able and prepared to lay over 1,000 feet of supply hose between fire hydrants. Engines carry 1,000-1,200 feet of supply hose. For reference, most hydrants on Mercer Island are within 400-500 feet.

When responding to a call for a brush fire, a variety of engines and leadership respond including ladder trucks, fire suppression apparatus, tenders (water tanker trucks), and more. A standard response deploys:

	Engines	Brush Trucks	Battalion Chief (BC)	Tender
1 Alarm	3		1	
2 Alarm	5	2	2	1
3 Alarm	6	3	3	2
4 Alarm	10	4	4	

The multi-tiered response to wildland fire is available to Mercer Island through Eastside Fire & Rescue and include:

- First-in structure engines – each staffed with wildfire-trained crews and wildland hose
- Local and regional brush trucks – EFR has four brush trucks, and a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) crew at Station 76
- Local and regional aid agreements with Bellevue, Bothell, Fall City, Redmond, Renton, Shoreline, and King County Fire District 45/Duvall, and more.

Efficiently and effectively putting down a fire is important after a wildfire starts. An essential step to wildfire preparedness and safety is preventing a wildfire from starting in the first place.

REDUCING WILDFIRE RISK

Wildfire risk reduction involves the entire community. It is a process that balances community interests, safety, risk tolerance, and building codes. Creating what experts term, a defensible space, around the home and neighborhood is essential to slowing or stopping the spread of wildfire, should one start.

Defensible space is broken into three ignition zones – Immediate (0-5' from the home), Intermediate (5-30' from buildings), and Extended (30-200' from structures). Of the three, making changes to the Immediate and Intermediate Zones around the home and neighborhood will make the most impact during a wildfire event. Taking steps like replacing bark with non-flammable material like rocks or pavers, planting [fire-resistant plants](#), and [reducing ladder fuels](#), all help create a no-fuel zone around the home and neighborhood.

Partner agencies from the King Conservation District and Puget Sound Energy (PSE) are also focused on wildfire risk reduction strategies. The [King Conservation District](#) aids homeowners and communities with wildfire risk assessments and more. Puget Sound Energy has a [year-round program](#) to not only prepare for but help prevent wildfires. The program includes strengthening the electric system, updating operational procedures during wildfire season like proactively turning off power during high-risk conditions, and assisting communities with emergency response.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS TOOLS

Just as important as reducing wildfire risk through physical changes to the landscape around the home or neighborhood, residents should have a disaster plan and know what to do if a wildfire does happen in Mercer Island. All Islanders should:

1. Understand the hazards where they live.
2. Create a plan for their household.
3. Build a kit.
4. Talk with their family about preparedness and practice the plan.
5. Prepare their pets.

Detailed information about each of these is available at www.mercerisland.gov/emergencyprep. The City also offers a number of events, classes, trainings, and certifications that teach these key components of basic emergency preparedness. Training opportunities offered by the City include:

[Map Your Neighborhood](#). The City offers Map Your Neighborhood (MYN) to help Island neighborhoods prepare together for disasters. Neighbors gather for an evening where they get to know each other, share contact information, learn the steps to follow after a disaster, and more. This program is offered throughout the year.

[National Night Out](#). This community-building event is held in neighborhoods and cities across the United States on the first Tuesday of August annually. The event is designed to increase awareness about police programs like the Neighborhood Watch Program, drug prevention, Paws on Patrol, emergency preparedness, and other crime prevention and safety efforts.

[Emergency Preparedness Presentation](#). Residents can schedule an emergency preparedness presentation for their business or community group.

[Community Emergency Response Team \(CERT\) Training](#). The City offers training in basic disaster preparedness and response skills to Mercer Island residents and businesses. Topics covered include fire safety, disaster medical operations, light search and rescue, and more.

[Emergency Well Training](#). Every June, City staff and volunteers host an Emergency Well training to refresh skills and train new workers.

[Emergency Preparedness and MIRO Field Day](#). The fourth Saturday of June, amateur radio operators across the country compete to contact as many other stations as possible.

[Amateur Radio Operator Training](#). Trained, resident-volunteer HAM/amateur radio operators are a key component of the City's emergency response plan. Mercer Island Radio Operators (MIRO) will help keep communications going during a disaster. They offer HAM radio training and opportunities to practice and keep skills fresh throughout the year.

[Emergency Management Volunteers](#). Volunteers are essential to emergency management projects and programs. Volunteers can put their skills, talents, and interests to use to help the Mercer Island community during an emergency.

CITY COMMUNICATIONS DURING DISASTERS

If the unthinkable happens, the City has a collection of communications tools it can – and does – use during emergencies. These tools vary from electronic reader boards stationed throughout the Island to push notifications through social media or our emergency alert notification system.

- **Emergency Alert Notification System.** Our emergency alert system, known as Red Alert or ALERT King County, will be activated and information will be pushed out to cell phones via a phone message, text, and/or email. Visit www.mercerisland.gov/emergencyalert to sign up.
- **City Website.** Information will be posted as a red alert banner at the top of the website. The banner is static and will appear on all City webpages, click the banner to open details.
- **Social Media.** During an emergency, the communications team will push out updates on social media. To follow City social media accounts, visit www.mercerisland.gov/socialmedia.
- **City Information Line.** The City's Call Center is staffed Monday through Friday, 8:30am – 5:00pm and is answered by a member of the City team. During an emergency, City staff will extend Call Center hours. If possible, check the City website for information before calling the information line, then call the information line or email the Customer Service Team if your questions have not been answered or if you have information to share with the City: (206) 275-7600 or customerservice@mercerisland.gov.
- **Electronic Message Boards.** Electronic message boards will be placed along key City arterials, highlighting emergency information.
- **Live YouTube Briefings.** When possible, the City will host live briefings on the City's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/mercerislandcouncil. Those will be available for viewing after the live event on YouTube, the City website, and [MI-TV Channel 21](#).
- **Local Media.** During a large-scale emergency, information will be passed through to local media including MI High School Station FM 88.9.
- **Loudspeaker.** If power is out and/or evacuation is eminent, City vehicles – not responding to the emergency – that are equipped with speakers and/or sirens will be deployed across the Island to alert neighborhoods of the situation.
- **Emergency Communications Team – MIRO.** During a major disaster, the City may also rely on the [Mercer Island Radio Operators \(MIRO\)](#), a group of dedicated, resident-volunteers who are trained to provide back-up communications and support to the City during major disasters.
- **Neighbor-to-Nighbor and Business-to-Business.** Residents are an integral part of the communication chain during an emergency. Contacting friends, neighbors, and colleagues to make sure they know the latest information is key. Get to know neighbors and share contact information before disaster strikes. Neighborhood block parties, National Night Out, and Map Your Neighborhood, as mentioned above, are great ways to get started.

What the message says is just as important as how the message is delivered. During a wildfire, the City will utilize tiered, easy-to-understand evacuation messaging.

Level 1. **“Ready”** Be aware of the danger in your area and start preparing for possible evacuation.

Level 2. **“Set”** Be prepared for sudden or short-notice evacuation. Residents who need help or more time should evacuate now.

Level 3. **“Go!”** Go now!

Last year, King, Snohomish, Pierce, and Thurston Counties launched the “Ready, Set, Go” regional evacuation readiness program with the goal of simplifying evacuation messaging across our region. If this message is heard anywhere in King, Snohomish, Pierce, or Thurston County, plan to or evacuate immediately. For a print-ready “Ready, Set, Go” flyer, [click here](#).

CONCLUSION

While Mercer Island’s wildfire risk is low, the rule of thumb in emergency management is “never say never.”

Taking steps now to reduce wildfire risk to Island homes and neighborhoods; preparing for wildfires and disasters of all kinds by creating a plan, building a kit, and learning essential skills; signing up for emergency alerts and understanding all the ways the City will communicate and the language it will use, will increase chances for survival during a disaster like a wildfire.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Receive report. No action necessary.