



Position Paper on Wildfire Preparedness

Introduction – Accelerate Our Community Wildfire Preparedness

It is urgent that we wake up to the fact that the deadliest and most destructive wildfires in California's history have occurred in recent years. Hillsborough, in particular, along with San Mateo county, has precious wildlands and lush vegetation that make us particularly vulnerable. Per the state of California, more than half of Hillsborough is located in the highest possible fire risk level ([VHFHSZ](#)). Moreover, fire does not respect jurisdictional boundaries. We need immediate action and sustained commitment to better protect our community. Clearly, there is great value in coordinating our efforts at the neighborhood, town and even county level.

Our city government needs to act. It is imperative that we face up to this wildfire scenario reality. Clearly, we must as a city properly fund and coordinate the necessary "wildfire preparedness" programs to provide public safety and property protection therefore. We cannot allow bureaucratic infighting and resistance to (probable) temporary tax increases to adequately fund such necessary efforts. While resident volunteer groups such as Hillsborough Firewise and Hillsborough Neighborhood Network (HNN) are making progress, it is unfortunate that these hard-working efforts are not sufficient. Our city government must fast-track other efforts as noted in this position paper.

To that end, this position paper will outline and briefly discuss key initiatives that city council candidate Aaron Zornes will help sponsor and champion at the town and county level. At the end of this paper is a compendium of resources.

- **Fix our emergency communication services system(s)**
- **Instantiate town evacuation plans**
- **Leverage our resources & efforts with other towns, San Mateo county & the state**
- **Enforce existing public safety ordinances**
- **Create & enforce "vegetation fire hazard" code**
- **Protect & rationalize our fire insurance premiums**
- **Increase effectiveness of Firewise Hillsborough beyond education**
- **Revitalize Hillsborough Neighborhood Network (HNN)**
- **Bolster self-reliance by Investing much more in CERT & HNN**
- **Delegate "Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) at risk" homeowner plan to HNN**

To date, there has been political and economic intransigence to funding coordination across [FEMA](#)-sponsored Community Emergency Response Teams ([CERT](#)), town-sponsored [Hillsborough Neighborhood Network](#) (HNN), and even city and county departments such as the Central County Fire Department and our police. Why do we NOT have a unified emergency communication system such that town residents receive reliable, timely alerts concerning local wildfires, air quality alerts, evacuation notices, planned public power outages and more? Why has the community NOT been briefed about the pending "Zonehaven" system that possibly unifies such needs? Why has our fire department delayed the WUI (wildland urban interface) inspections and enforcements? Why was the planned evacuation drill coordination between our police, fire department and HNN postponed? Why does our town not promote CERT training to the degree that other towns in California do? Is it because our townspeople are self-centered and focused on economic and social climbing? Not at all. It is incumbent upon our city government to educate, incent and make available leveraged tools and information to enable our townspeople to "best help themselves" during natural disasters such as wildfires, as well as to prevent/abate their occurrence locally.

FINDINGS

- **Fix Our Emergency Communication Services System(s).** Our town's emergency communication system is broken. In terms of accurate and timely notices about wildfires, planned power outages, water system failures, evacuation notices, etc. it is well
- Paid for Aaron Zornes for Hillsborough City Council* FPPC# pending www.hillsborough-quality-of-life.com

known that town residents receive multiple conflicting notices ... and even then ONLY when the cellphone carriers' cellular data system is working (currently requires SMC Alert for emergency/priority warnings/alerts via SMS texts). This vital topic will also be the subject of a soon-to-be-published separate position paper. And will discuss/recommend the options ranging from: NOAA, TIS, HAM and FRS. What is important to know for now is that all of these systems are likely to be superseded by yet another new entrant in this key area – "Zonehaven". Zonehaven is a Bay Area start up that purports to provide unified communications across text/SMS and social networks for communicating regarding hyper-localized wildfires and real-time evacuation routes. Our high-level analysis shows that NOAA is primarily used on the USA east coast for hurricanes and the Midwest for tornados .. and requires additional separate radio equipment for the homeowner to purchase. Traveler information systems (TIS) appear to be useful low-cost, easy to implement near term solution for a unified command center (police, fire, public works) to broadcast AM radio signals on FCC-approved frequency with range of 3-5 miles (lower than usual due to our hilly terrain). And HAM radio with its cousin 2-way consumer radio system FRS appears best suited to maintain contact with the world outside of Hillsborough, and not necessarily within Hillsborough due to its newness, complexity for consumers (esp. retirees) and technology range limitations. For the foreseeable future we are limited to SMS texting which is itself is dependent upon cellular data which in turn is problematic within Hillsborough. Hillsborough's city manager plans to give a briefing on the Zonehaven to residents on October 26. During recent [HNN Neighborfest presentations](#) (Sept 2020), one official stated availability in mid-2011.

- **Instantiate Town Evacuation Plans.** Do you know what evacuation routes to use for natural disasters? Do you believe our town has a plan (and the ability to communicate it successfully?). Do you know where your official Temporary Refugee Area (TRA) for staging your exodus? Do you know how you can communicate with your loved ones in such an evacuation mode? Our sources tell us that there was a public rehearsal planned for summer 2020 that got canceled by the town. In the recent HNN Neighborfest (Sept 2020) Zoom meeting for townspeople, when the question was raised "Where do we evacuate to?" by one of the homeowner attendees, there was awkward silence among the town officials and department heads. Without going into too much detail, the best description of the answer ultimately given was "waffling". After some time, the topic of Zonehaven was brought up with our city manager offering that there is a planned "*coffee meeting via Zoom at end of October to discuss this with residents*". Stay tuned.
- **Leverage Our Resources & Efforts with Other Towns, San Mateo County & the State.** Our town needs to advocate joining with other towns along with San Mateo county into a Joint Powers Agreement funded by parcel tax to provide a pool of funds for 5-10 years to directly address near term critical funding of wildfire abatement projects. There is economic scale and other synergistic benefits to polling our joint efforts into a greater and more leveraged capability to abate and fight wildfires. Marin County along with Mill Valley, Novato, etc. have done so. One possible outcome is to pool our county and city resources to fund acquisition of more Level VI canyon fire-fighting trucks. Such nimble crew cab pickup trucks are fitted with water/foam tank and is funded by state grants. Ours will be at station 38 with the rest of CCFD's stationed along the US-280 corridor with much more maneuverability to get into our local canyons. Additionally, firefighting helicopter such as the Firehawk that metro areas such as LA and San Diego already could be accelerated by contributing to the CAL FIRE efforts to fund such a firefighting system for the greater SF Bay Area. We need to continue to leverage Federal and state grants with San Mateo county to clear wildlands and subsidize debris chipping.
- **Enforce Existing Public Safety Ordinances.** Town residents have been instructed by our government to document code violations with the app [SeeClickFix](#). Currently there are several hundred outstanding issues documented by the community. Town residents need to be able to use this app to easily and rapidly identify and document fire safety hazards rather than filling out current Google doc form on CCFD web site. Furthermore, this system can be used to ensure that major debris problems are identified on privately-owned properties. HNN has recently asked their Neighborhood Leads to inventory and report such hazards and could benefit from using this app rather than "yet another" manual data entry reporting system.
- **Create & Enforce "Vegetation Fire Hazard" Code.** Our canyons need to be cleared of extreme fire hazard materials and maintained. Currently Hillsborough code allows homeowners to plant practically any tree or brush ... and not maintain them for fire safety or aesthetics. Yet our [ADRB](#) and other departments will micromanage the color of your house exterior, the ornaments on your automatics gate, and more. As a community, we need to seriously rein in this "anything goes" attitude and begin to "evergreen" (consistently upgrade/clear) our landscapes such that problem trees (including acacia, eucalyptus, and sick Monterey pines, etc.) and the likes of [Scotch Broom](#) are eradicated, if not immediately then in the next several years. If the homeowner is unwilling to do so, then the city should execute the removal for the homeowner and bill them as we have

been false home alarm calls, etc. The same applies to wild landscapes on the hills and in the valleys where “absentee” homeowners neglect to care for the safety of their property and the town by allowing unfettered landscape growth. The town should provide WUI-style assessment, make a plan with homeowner and if homeowner unwilling to execute within reasonable time frame, then the city goes into action and puts a lien on the property to pay for the “public safety nuisance removal operation”. Note that our town already maintains a list of dead trees to remove and is working to obtain bids to do so. Homeowners can benefit from a grant from San Mateo county to do FREE chipping for Hillsborough tree removal.

- **Protect & Rationalize Our Fire Insurance Premiums.** Resident-organized Firewise Hillsborough is working with insurance carriers to align our [WUI](#) fire safety measures as well as help local homeowners secure such insurance. Thanks to Firewise Hillsborough leader David Weinberg, our town is getting certificates of compliance through the national Firewise organization which will help normalize our homeowner fire insurance premiums by educating and confirming with the carriers that we are serious and making progress towards “wildfire preparedness”. Note also that currently only USAA gives an insurance premium discount/rebate for “tree removal fire hazard”.
- **Increase Effectiveness of Firewise Hillsborough.** Our Firewise organization is officially recognized by and working with our city government. Beyond brochures and education, we need to increase the “throw weight” of Firewise by chartering them to help educate *and* provision homeowners with fire-preventative vent covers, etc. as have the Firewise organizations of Marin and elsewhere. It is not sufficiently effective or efficient for each homeowner to have to educate themselves about “in market” preventative solutions/fixtures. Our town needs to create “recommended” components and contractors to help streamline and accelerate the process of hardening our home against wildfire. We need “hands on workshops”, group purchasing coops, and other such assistance. Our Firewise team needs more promotion and results such as the planned “Hillsborough Firewise annual town clean up” day.
- **Revitalize Hillsborough Neighborhood Network (HNN).** What happens when you throw a party and nobody comes? The recent HNN Beighborfest virtual event on a Sunday morning drew 130+ registrations (with ~70 Zoom attendees) out of a population of 3,900+ Hillsborough households. Yes, there is a pandemic and economic crisis going on, but even before these two crises, event attendance was extremely low. Our city needs to find ways to invigorate public opinion and support for this vital organization. Note the city support is publicly lackluster. If you go to the [town’s HNN page](#), the latest info that is posted is from 2018 ... even though Neighborhood fest 2019 was held “live” at West School in summer/fall 2019. We need to build upon the great hard-working, well-intentioned HNN neighborhood leads by expanding their numbers and providing them more focused town-funded resources to support their neighborhoods. One great example is HNN leaders Dennis Tom and Richard Miller working with HCSO to pre-position CERT supplies in shipping containers at our local schools.
- **Bolster Self-Reliance by Investing Much More in CERT & HNN.** It has been the recent NorCal experience that “neighbor helping neighbor” is key when “no notice” events happen such as wildfires. Additionally, even with substantial notice, local governmental resources will be stretched too thin or overwhelmed and it will increasingly fall upon the community itself to provide certain emergency services. Currently both CERT and HNN are overwhelmingly staffed by the 60+ year old baby boomers when in reality the community needs the younger community members to step up and take the training and join in the community fabric. A critical mass of both middle school and high school students should be encouraged to complete a version of the basic CERT training. The town of Hillsborough along with both Hillsborough City School District, San Mateo High School district and our private schools should be funded to provide such training and further promote it to the degree that other community service programs receive. Additionally, HNN neighborhood groups need to set targets for the number of trained adult CERT responders necessary to adequately support their neighborhood groups and compete against each other to recruit and train/retain such cadres.
- **Delegate “Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) At Risk” Homeowner Plan to HNN.** PG&E’s dramatically expanded scope of planned grid outages (Planned Power Outages or PPOs) have a particular harsh effect on our vulnerable populations – senior citizens and those requiring electric medical devices. We need to step up as a town and proactively inventory such homeowners and then have an action plan to educate, alert, provision, safeguard and check on this community to provide for their needs during PPOs. It has been reported that during the recent spate of PPOs not one of the elderly residents in my general neighborhood were alerted to the pending power outages nor were they attended to by HNN and other well-meaning service organizations ... instead it was “everyone for themselves” mode. This has to change.

BOTTOM LINE: Our city government needs to act. It is imperative that we face up to our 21st century wildfire scenario reality.

Wildfire Preparedness REFERENCES *(click on links below to read other relevant articles/research)*

- [Town of Hillsborough Wildland Urban Interface \(WUI\) program](#) (courtesy of Central County Fire Department - CCFD) - -good overview ... review [more WUI concepts](#)
- [Learn about San Mateo county's Fire Severity Zones \(FSZ\)](#)
- [Sign up for our Central County Fire Department's Wildland Urban Interface \(WUI\) complementary home inspection appointment](#)
- [Report fire danger situations to our local fire department](#) – Google doc form, no anonymous reporting ... problem homes with fire hazards can be reported ... either handled by CCFD, one of local WUI inspectors or Hillsborough town code enforcement staff ... goal = “get on top of it ... cleaned up & corrected”
- [California Legislative Analyst's Office \(LAO\) Assessment of Governor Newsom's 2020-21 Wildfire-related proposals](#)
- [Rate your home's fire insurance risk & learn about FireLine risk evaluation system and California's Fair Plan fire insurance program](#)
- [Article on Joint Power Agreement in Marin county](#) to pool town and county resources to accelerate funding for wildfire firefighting via temporary parcel tax increases ... good example of intra-county coordination
- [Sign up for San Mateo county's official \(pending\) "Zonehaven" emergency evacuation system](#) – notices & plans
- [Sign up for San Mateo County \(SMC\) Alert system](#) for emergency/priority warnings/alerts via SMS texts
- Learn about FEMA-sponsored Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training for disaster preparedness
 - [History of CERT \(good background info\)](#)
 - [FEMA site for detailed info](#)
- [Sign up for CERT training managed & taught by our local fire department](#) (CCFD)
- [Learn about Hillsborough Neighborhood Network \(HNN\)](#) a town-sponsored initiative to help neighborhoods organize & prepare themselves for emergency response
- [Register your home with HNN](#) for your Hillsborough neighborhood group
- [Learn about SEE-CLICK-FIX community issue reporting system](#) – note Town of Hillsborough Public Works & Hillsborough Police code enforcement monitor & act on these public safety & code enforcement issues
- [Sign up for SEE-CLICK-FIX](#) to start notifying the town of safety & code enforcement issues
- [Sign up for local social networking app Nextdoor](#) to discuss wildfire issues & share advice, resources
- [Info on California Natural Resources Agency \(CNRA\) plan to use LIDAR technology to map/mitigate wildfires](#)
- [California reduces regulations for tree-clearing/thinning](#)
- [Learn about CAL FIRE's strategic plan](#) (currently only FY2019 posted as our state agency is very active for past 2 years acting on the plan)
- [Use CAL FIRE's smart phone app to gauge your readiness & to plan evacuations](#)
- [Learn about the new generation of "Level VI" canyon-effective fire fighting vehicles coming to our local fire department](#) the next 6 months – see pages 2-4
- Learn about the current generation of Firehawk firefighting helicopters (retrofitted Black Hawk military choppers) deployed in both LA and San Diego metro areas, and (hopefully soon) in SF Bay Area via CAL FIRE
 - [Vimeo demonstration video](#)
 - [CAL FIRE video](#)