

January 29th, 2026 Joint Meeting of the EDPC and EPRC subcommittees on changing Los Altos Hills fire codes and landscape standards.



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Persons in the room, typically identified as “the group”:

- EDPC: Elizabeth Loinaz, Carol Gotlieb, Peter Brown,
- EPRC: Dave Stewart, Phil Harter
- Council: Rajiv Bhateja

Remote (videoconference):

- EDPC: Grace Tsang
- LAHCFD: Denise Gluhan, Paige Russell
- Staff: Jay Bradford, Tim McBirney
- Residents: Neal Mielke, Neil Katin, Bill Ralston

The meeting started with a review of the Landscaping Guide, v 2.1. While a discussion of the Heritage Oak ordinance changes was on the agenda, we didn't get to it.

Overall purpose and scope

- The group is revising the **fire protection / wildfire hardening section of the landscaping guide**, planning a new version (referred to as “version 2.2”) that will also eventually lead to updated plant lists and, longer-term, to ordinance changes.
- They emphasize that this guide is **advisory**, not an ordinance, but it will strongly influence conditions on new development and recommendations for existing homes.

Intro paragraph and references to standards

- The existing sentence about “preventing the likelihood of wildfires” is replaced with Paige Russell’s language: *“to minimize wildfire risk to your property, establish defensible space around structures following local ordinances and recognized safety standards”* (wordsmithing around that idea).
- There is debate about whether to **name specific authorities** (CAL FIRE, IBHS, NFPA, etc.) or to keep “recognized safety standards” more generic so the text does not go out of date; Paige prefers generic references backed by current science, others want concrete examples so readers know where to look.
- Tentative resolution: keep a **slightly vague main sentence** but add wording that points people to authoritative sources (e.g., CAL FIRE, IBHS, local ordinances), possibly via an appendix or by telling readers to search the town website for “wildfire preparedness” or similar.

Tone about balancing screening vs safety

- There is concern that language about “balancing” wildfire safety with screening and privacy could be misread as treating safety as optional.
- Participants argue that **safety must be the top priority** given insurance loss and existential wildfire risk, and that the guide should avoid implying that screening can routinely override safety.
- They agree to **delete the last sentence** of a paragraph that suggested a tradeoff between wildfire safety and screening, and to reframe the idea as: design should aim to achieve both privacy/screening and fire safety, rather than put them in conflict.

Defensible space structure (zones 0, 1, 2)

- They want the section to clearly organize around **Zone 0 (0–5 ft), Zone 1 (5–30 ft), and Zone 2 (30–100 ft or to the property line)**, using accepted defensible-space terminology.

- A proposed compact summary:
 - Zone 0: “nothing combustible” within 5 feet of walls and decks.
 - Zone 1: “few trees, shrubs, widely spaced, no ladder fuels.”
 - Zone 2: trees and shrubs or groups in “islands” with adequate spacing and no continuous fuel.

Zone 0 (0–5 feet from structure)

- The group aligns with **Zone 0 = 5 feet from walls and decks**, not 5 feet from the roof edge. Decks are included as part of the structure.
- Consensus that **no highly flammable plants or materials** should be in Zone 0; the phrase “nothing should burn” is accepted as a useful high-level rule.
- They discuss how close low, non-combustible plantings (like succulents in gravel) can be to walls, using photos from CAL FIRE / flipbooks as examples; the guide will rely on these visuals rather than detailed prose alone.

Trees near structures and rooflines

- A previous sentence said: “trees should be kept at least as far from structures as the width of the mature crown.” Several people find that ambiguous and too strict for typical lots.
- Fire personnel (Paige and Denise) describe **best practice**:
 - Ideally, tree **canopies are at least 5 feet away horizontally** from the structure.
 - Where they do overhang, branches should be **about 10 feet above the roof**, and 10 feet from chimneys, to reduce leaf litter and ignition risk.
- They emphasize **case-by-case judgment**, especially for valuable mature oaks: arborist input is important to avoid harming trees while meeting safety goals.
- There is recognition that **insurance inspectors and County Fire** already look closely at overhanging canopies; having 5-foot horizontal and 10-foot vertical clearances aligns with what residents will see in inspections.

- For the guide, they lean toward a **plain sentence** such as “tree branches should not overhang the house” or “trees should preferably not overhang the roof,” while pointing to external documents (e.g., CAL FIRE’s Model Defensible Space Inspection and the defensiblespace.org guide) for exact numerical standards.

Mature trees in Zone 0 and 1

- Discussion distinguishes between **best practices** vs. what should be required, and between **new construction** and existing homes.
- Paige notes that in practice she generally **does not recommend automatic removal of mature trees** in Zone 0; instead she focuses on pruning, limbing up, removing ladder fuels, and addressing highly combustible species (e.g., Italian cypress, juniper) especially within about 0–30 or even 0–100 feet.
- IBHS guidelines are acknowledged as **stricter** (more inclined to recommend removing trees in Zone 0), while the defensiblespace.org material stresses that healthy, mature trees can help block embers and need not be removed, especially if properly maintained.
- The guide will likely **draw a distinction** between:
 - Recommendations for **new design** (where it is feasible to site trees outside Zone 0), and
 - Guidance for **existing mature trees** (emphasis on pruning, health, spacing, and species selection rather than blanket removal).

Dead wood, habitat, and ecology

- A sentence noting that **dead wood on oaks provides habitat** for birds and insects is removed from the fire-protection section, based on concern it conflicts with the safety message.
- Participants agree that while habitat value is real, the **fire protection section should stay focused on safety**, with ecological considerations acknowledged but not used to justify leaving dangerous dead material in place near structures.

- At a higher level, there is agreement that the town wants to **protect local ecology and native trees** (especially oaks), but that this must be done within a framework where wildfire safety is clearly primary.

Highly flammable species near homes

- Specific species called out as **especially flammable** and unsuitable near houses include **pinos, junipers, Italian cypress, and eucalyptus**, largely due to flammable oils and fast burn behavior.
- The guide's text will retain or reinforce language that these species **"should not be planted near the house,"** with stronger recommendations or "priority removal" for such species in the inner zones (0–30 ft).

Mulch and groundcovers

- They change "wood chips" to **"composted wood chips"** based on other agencies' guidance, but several people note that "composted wood chips" are difficult to find for homeowners and often proprietary/industrial products.
- Denise and Paige describe emerging fire-service expectations that **mulch in the first few feet will need to be non-combustible**, and that regulatory changes are likely (e.g., banning flammable mulch near structures).
- After extensive discussion, they coalesce around:
 - Preferring **inorganic or non-combustible mulch** (e.g., gravel) near structures.
 - If wood chips are used in Zone 1, they should be **compacted and limited to about 2–3 inches depth**, and not used in Zone 0.
- **Decomposed granite (DG)** is discussed:
 - Compacted DG functions as a walkway, is treated differently in development-area calculations, and is not recommended as mulch under plants in this context.
 - There is concern about conflicts with maximum development area rules; they decide **not to recommend DG as mulch** in the fire-protection text to avoid confusion.

Spacing and “islands” of vegetation (Zone 1-2)

- They discuss **tree and shrub spacing** in terms of “islands of vegetation” with non-combustible or low-fuel gaps between them, consistent with CAL FIRE and Santa Barbara/Santa Monica defensible-space guidance.
- Rather than hard-coding distances (e.g., specific feet between plants), the group leans toward using the phrase **“adequately spaced”** and then **asterisking to external resources**—flipbooks and diagrams (Marin Fire’s “Fire Smart Yards,” CAL FIRE diagrams, defensiblespace.org)—to show what that looks like visually.
- The reason is that **pictures more effectively show spacing and slope effects** than long textual descriptions, and fixed numbers may age poorly or conflict with future ordinance details.

Power-line clearance

- For trees under wires, they favor a simple, generic rule: **“trees should not be planted under power lines; follow PG&E guidelines available on their website”**, with a note such as “go to pge.com and search for ‘trees and power lines.’”
- They also mention PG&E’s own diagrams and lists of **“fire-resistant” species** that can be planted at different distances from lines; these will be cited rather than reproduced.

House hardening linkage

- The editing team wants the fire-protection section of the guide to **explicitly link landscape guidance to house hardening**:
 - Adding a sentence like “Hardening your house against wildfire is also very important” near the defensible-space description.
 - Recommending that homeowners obtain a **Home Ignition Zone (HIZ) survey** from fire authorities.

- This is meant to reinforce that vegetation management and building materials must work together, especially where older structures cannot easily be fully re-clad in non-combustible materials.

Relationship to codes and ordinances

- Jay Bradford walks through how the **California Wildland-Urban Interface Code and Part 7 of the building code** (as adopted town-wide) already provide a framework for defensible space and vegetation management.
- The landscaping guide is intended to “**fill in the blanks**” by offering more practical, objective standards and examples that staff can use when conditioning new construction and advising existing homeowners, even before a full ordinance rewrite.
- In the longer term, they anticipate that a **future fire ordinance** will more explicitly codify spacing, species, and zone standards, and at that point the guide can be updated again to align with the new law.

Tim McMurray's comments focus on how the Town's **Heritage Oak permit rules** interact with the fire-safety goals discussed in the meeting, and where the current process causes friction or confusion for applicants and staff.

Core points

- Tim explains that **Heritage Oaks** are legally protected and require a Town permit for removal or for any action that could significantly damage them, which is a separate process from regular landscape approvals. He notes that this protection is rooted in long-standing Municipal Code language, and that it applies regardless of a project's other merits.
- He emphasizes that staff often has to **balance competing mandates**: on one side, fire-safety guidance and defensible-space standards; on the other, the Heritage Oak protections that discourage or prevent removal, even when trees are close to structures or in high-risk areas.

Permit criteria and discretion

- Tim describes the **criteria staff uses** when reviewing Heritage Oak permit requests: whether the tree is dead or dying, structurally hazardous, demonstrably diseased beyond recovery, or clearly in conflict with essential development or safety needs on the site.
- He notes that, while fire risk can be part of the justification for removal, staff still looks first at **alternatives short of removal**—such as pruning, limbing up, removing surrounding ladder fuels, or adjusting site design—before recommending that a Heritage Oak be taken out.

Tension with wildfire recommendations

- Tim points out that the emerging **wildfire best practices** (like keeping certain distances between trees and structures, or avoiding trees in Zone 0) can be difficult to apply rigidly when a large, healthy Heritage Oak is already in place and strongly protected by ordinance.
- He explains that this sometimes leads to **mixed messages for applicants**: the fire-safety guidance suggests greater clearance, but the Heritage Oak rules push the Town toward preservation; staff has to interpret both sets of rules and find a defensible, site-specific compromise.

Need for better alignment

- Tim suggests that, over time, the Town may need to **better align the Heritage Oak regulations with updated fire-safety policies**, so that applicants, arborists, and reviewers are not forced into case-by-case negotiations on every project involving a protected oak near a home.
- He supports the idea that any future **fire ordinance and updated landscaping guide** should clearly explain how Heritage Oak permits will be handled when fire-safety issues are involved—what documentation is needed, when removal may be considered, and when enhanced maintenance is the preferred path.