



## Legislation Text

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Report regarding a resolution determining the continued existence of an emergency and the need to continue emergency repairs in response to the Sign Hill Diamond Fire. (*Greg Mediati, Deputy Director of Parks and Recreation*)

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**It is recommended that the City Council adopt a resolution determining the continued existence of an emergency and the need to continue emergency repairs in response to the Sign Hill Diamond Fire.**

On October 16, 2020 at 11:54 a.m., a fire ignited on Sign Hill originating on the western section of the iconic letters. This was the third day of a regional Red Flag Warning with elevated temperatures, reduced humidity, and a steady easterly wind. The wind pushed the fire quickly to the west across the southern face of the hill through the grasses before spreading into the nearby tree groves. The incident commander realized the fire would grow quickly and structures would be threatened. Additional resources were immediately called to the scene to assist.

In total, five alarms of fire apparatus from South San Francisco and nearby agencies responded to the emergency. Additionally, an agreement with the California Forestry and Fire Department (CalFire) was utilized and provided the City with their associated aircraft, hand crews and wildland firefighting equipment for the incident. The fire burned for nearly three hours before being declared under control. Fire crews remained on site for over two days to ensure all hot spots were extinguished and embers would not reignite. Fortunately, the fire was kept to 16 acres and only caused minor property damage to three homes on Mountain Road, and no one was injured, thanks to the fuel load reduction and fire break work completed in recent years and the fire fighters' great efforts.

Immediately after the fire, the City Manager's Office, Parks and Recreation Department, Fire Department and Public Works/Engineering Department staff met to discuss next steps to prepare the hill for the winter months. On October 22, 2020, City Parks and Recreation staff completed a walkthrough and prepared an assessment of the state of the Sign Hill environment and trails to evaluate the scale of fire damage. Based on staff's assessment, two phases of work were established - short term work to winterize the hill, remove hazards, and make it safe to reopen, and longer term work to expand on the ongoing fuel load reduction and maintain firebreaks on Sign Hill.

Due to the emergent nature of the work to prepare Sign Hill for wet weather, and potential debris flows, falling trees, or the potential for future fire due to the buildup of fuel in the form of dead trees and brush, it was determined an emergency declaration was needed to expedite the work.

For historical context, it should be noted that on September 12, 2018, the City Council adopted a resolution delegating authority to the City Manager to order any emergency action and enter into necessary contracts pursuant to the provisions and restrictions of Public Contract Code Section 22050.

At the November 24, 2020 Regular City Council Meeting, the City Council adopted a resolution determining the existence of an emergency as a result of the Diamond Fire, and authorized emergency repairs. These repairs largely include the removal of more than 1,500 trees directly impacted by the Diamond Fire for a contract total not to exceed \$900,000. Additionally, the City executed a contract with Acacia Environmental Construction to perform immediate slope stabilization and erosion mitigation work on newly exposed and vulnerable sloped areas for a contract total not to exceed \$110,559.

### ***Tree Removals***

Davey Tree Experts began their work on December 3, 2020 focusing on the area near the Ridge Trail known as Seubert Grove. At the time of drafting this report, this portion of the work is largely complete, with only a handful of trees remaining that do not present a hazard to trail users. In each work area, the trees being removed are largely being chipped on site to help with slope stabilization or are safely stockpiled for use in restoration efforts on the hill. Some tree trunks of twelve inches or greater in diameter may be left on the ground perpendicular to the slope of the hill. The smaller brush is being removed so as not to serve as potential fuel for the next fire season. This work is in accordance with CalFire forestry guidance.

At the time of this report all trails are clear of hazardous trees, with only the Iris Trail remaining closed due to trail conditions. The Iris Trail has steps that need to be repaired, and staff are working on addressing that issue currently. Tree work has begun to shift focus on large dead stands that present a fuel load risk, and trees adjacent to residences on the hill in an effort to abate the impacted and hazardous trees. The status of the trails on Sign Hill will be regularly updated, once the steps are repaired, on the City's webpage under the Sign Hill link for residents to access closure information.

Tree work under this emergency declaration is expected to continue through much of 2021 and the emergency declaration will likely terminate when the rainy season in 2021 begins. Staff anticipates this to be sometime in November or December and feels confident that all emergency work will have been completed by that date.

Additional work to remove trees and repair trails is still needed, however it is less emergent in nature. Staff will issue a separate request for proposals for this work once the emergency declaration has ended, with hopes to resume work in the spring.

The month of March 2021 marked the beginning of bird nesting season, and Parks staff have finalized a contract with Wood PLC, a biologist consultant to survey for nesting birds. Performing bird nest surveys allowed for work to continue through the nesting season. Wood PLC conducted preliminary surveys on the week of April 19, 2021 and continued to perform subsequent surveys every fourteen days through the end of August 2021, the end of nesting season. Surveying for bird nests during the tree work is required by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act which provides protections to bird habitat. Staff found it necessary to continue work through the nesting season in order to open trails to the public within a reasonable timeframe, and to reduce the fuel load that still exists on the hill as much as possible prior to the next fire season.

### ***Erosion Control***

Acacia Environmental Construction was contracted to perform the erosion control efforts on December 11, 2020. Staff met with Acacia's project team on December 14, 2020 to discuss the project's priorities and phases of work. Erosion control work began on December 28, 2020, and consisted of installation of check dams in drainage areas and culverts, fiber waddle installation on steep slopes, and hydro-seeding barren areas of the hill

with a native seed blend, which in addition to the slope stabilization efforts will help re-establish the hill's native grassland ecosystem. Additionally, tree stumps and root mass from felled trees are left in place to help with slope stabilization. Mulch from removed trees was also spread to lessen rain impacts.

Acacia Environmental Construction completed the erosion control work in early February 2021. The hydro-seeding that was installed has become established, providing crucial stabilization of hillsides and future native habitat for native species.

### ***Emergency Continuation***

Continuation of this emergency is necessary to continue the aforementioned work in response to the Diamond Fire and safely re-open the park as soon as possible. Terminating the work now would leave hazardous trees and a significant amount of fuel load in close proximity to homes.

As required by Public Contract Code section 22050(c)(1), this emergency tree removal and erosion control project will continue to be placed back on future regular City Council meeting agendas for the Council to review this emergency action and determine whether there is a need to continue the action, until such emergency repairs have been completed and the project terminated. Section 22050 requires the City Council determine the continuance of the emergency by a four-fifths vote. Adoption of the associated resolution authorizes the continuance of the emergency repair work to address the response to the Diamond Fire and related repairs.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

Work for the immediate tree work and erosion control measures is estimated to be \$1,010,559, though subsequent work is needed to rehabilitate trails and park amenities, and for habitat restoration. Cost estimates for that work are to be determined once tree work is complete. Bird nest surveying for the year is a total of \$18,988. Currently, funding exists outside of the general fund for this project.

### **RELATIONSHIP TO STRATEGIC PLAN**

This project will contribute to the City's Strategic Plan under Priority #2 by helping to create sustainable parks and open space areas, and under Priority #4 by enhancing public safety on and around Sign Hill.

### **CONCLUSION**

Approving the resolution and adopting the findings will authorize the continuation of emergency repair work to address the hazardous conditions as a result of the Diamond Fire on Sign Hill. Staff recommends that the City Council determines that the emergency continues to exist and the emergency action, undertaken pursuant to the City Manager's delegated authority, remains necessary.