

Wildland Fire Suppression Assessment District

City of Santa Barbara

OVERVIEW

REGION

Central Coast

POPULATION

91,376

TOOL TYPES

*Special Assessment
District*

LEAD AGENCIES

*Santa Barbara City Fire
Department*

CLIMATE IMPACT AREA

Wildfire Resilience

SUMMARY

On July 11th, 2006, the Santa Barbara City Council approved the formation of a Wildland Fire Suppression Assessment District, which was then approved by voters in accordance with California Proposition 218. The Assessment District has been reapproved by City Council annually since 2006, providing hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual funding for wildfire risk reduction work, such as vegetation and road clearance, defensible space assistance (including voluntary evaluations and chipping), and community fuels treatments.

The boundaries of Santa Barbara's Wildland Fire Suppression Assessment District align with two of the city's mapped fire hazard areas — the Foothill Zone and the Extreme Foothill Zone. In addition to landscaping and defensible space regulations, these areas have code requirements for structural hardening (roofing, windows & doors, decking materials, etc.) consistent with Chapter 7A of the California Residential Building Code (Santa Barbara Municipal Code Chapter 22.04, §§ 22.04.020 – 22.04.070).

This broad approach to wildfire risk reduction through spatially implemented construction requirements, defensible space and landscaping regulations, and the Assessment District's programmatic community education and fuels reduction results in a holistic response to wildfire risk that protects both new and existing development in the City's highest-risk communities

This case study was selected as a Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Planning Best Practice because it showcases a unique funding mechanism for local wildfire risk reduction activities by creating a designated assessment district within city boundaries. This well-established approach, which receives annual support from elected officials, has helped fund a staff position to engage residents in fuel mitigation and educational activities. Finally, this case study illustrates how a voter-supported voluntary initiative can complement other planning and fire-related activities, such as city regulations for the wildland-urban interface.

Special Assessment Districts are voter-approved property tax assessments utilized to raise funding for specific public improvement projects. These taxes are tied to designated parcels within districts or other identified assessment areas. Communities and fire authorities can create assessment districts to provide dedicated sources of funding for wildfire prevention and mitigation activities within designated area(s).

TOOL DESIGN

In 2004, the City of Santa Barbara Fire Department drafted and adopted the City's first Wildland Fire Plan, an early version of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The plan worked to coordinate both city-owned and private lands to reduce hazardous vegetation. The first Wildland Fire Plan helped the City delineate its high fire hazard areas (including the Foothill and Extreme Foothill Zones) and craft specific policies to reduce wildfire hazard, while providing a framework for securing funding and coordinating risk reduction efforts.

Front Image: Santa Barbara Fire Department

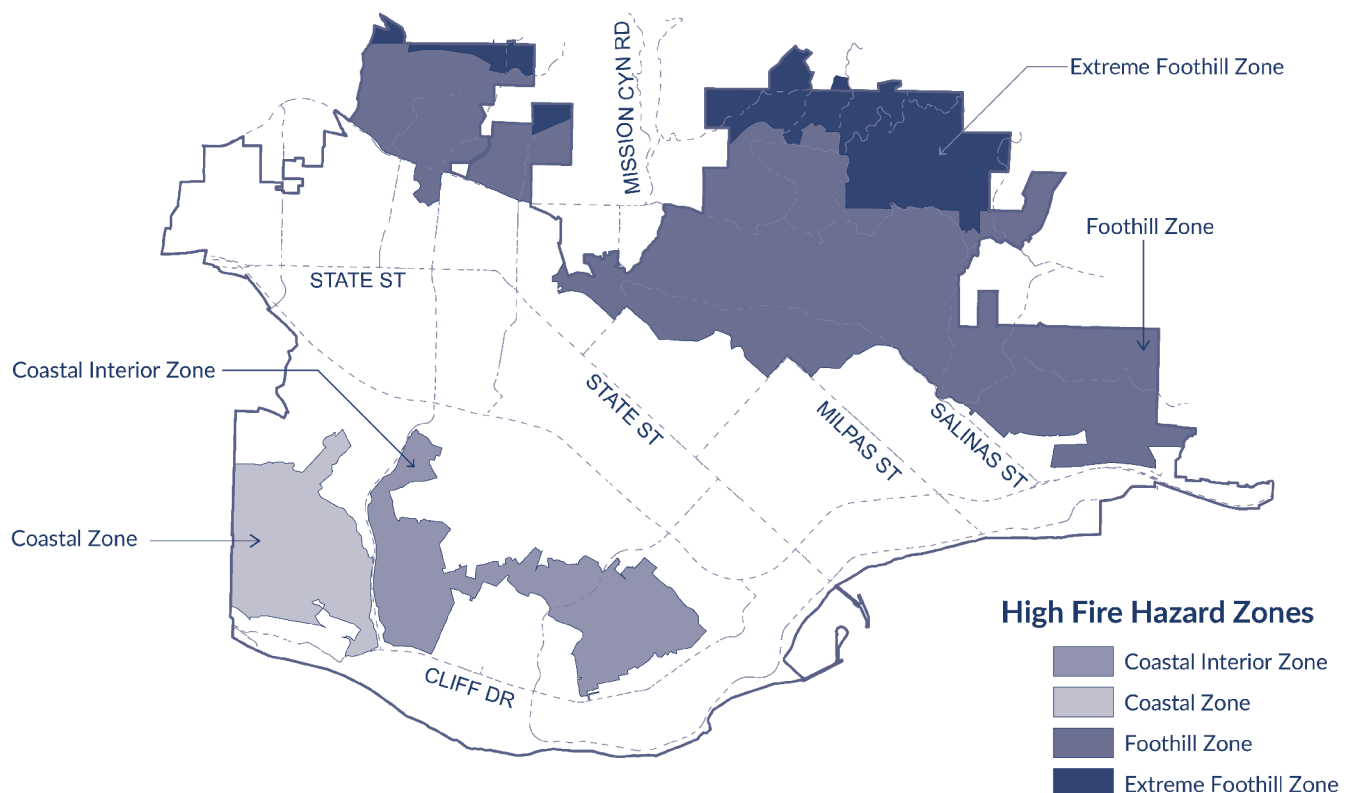
The establishment of the Wildland Fire Suppression Assessment District followed in 2006 to aid the City in advancing policies and goals outlined within the Wildland Fire Plan, including the ability to leverage a special tax assessment on properties located within the two high fire hazards area identified within the 2004 Wildland Fire Plan. This would create a source of funding, separate from General Fund allocations, that could be used specifically for wildfire risk reduction activities including roadside clearance, chipping, and community fuels treatments.

The City Council, however, could not levee this assessment on homes located within fire hazard areas because of State Proposition 218, passed in 1999. Prop. 218 required local governments who wished to impose special assessments or property-related fees to hold an election to establish a special assessment district. Those who

owned property within the proposed bounds of the district were allowed to vote to approve or disapprove the proposed assessment district. Other communities across the state have utilized Prop. 218, for example, to create pest control districts for mosquito abatement.

To gain voter support, the City decided that any staff funded by the Assessment District would focus on homeowner education and outreach and implement community-oriented fuels reductions activities but would not enforce municipal regulations related to fire prevention (e.g., fire hazard abatement or defensible space). The Assessment District passed with a simple majority (51% to 49%), achieving the goal of creating a sustainable funding source for wildfire risk reduction. The Assessment District must be re-approved each year by City Council but does not need to be voted upon again by the public.

City of Santa Barbara High Fire Hazard Area



Map of High Fire Hazard Areas of the City of Santa Barbara that constitute the Wildland Fire Special Assessment District. Adapted from image provided by the City of Santa Barbara

Programs that the Assessment District funds include:

1. *Vegetation Road Clearance (conducted September through January)*
2. *Defensible Space Assistance, including voluntary evaluations & chipping services*
3. *Community Fuels Treatment Network and Vegetation Management Units that are prioritized with the City Wildland Fire Plan (now the city's CWPP)*

The Community Fuels Treatment Network and Vegetation Management Units tie in with regional fire management priorities along the upper ridge of the district to prevent fire spread. Partners in the Treatment Network include the Santa Barbara County Fire Department and Montecito Fire Protection District.

IMPLEMENTATION

Funding that the district collects is used to staff a full-time Fire Services Specialist that works on wildfire programs within the boundaries of the district. Having a full-time Fire Services Specialist fosters close relationships between the Fire Department and homeowners, providing consistent and trusted resources. This parlays into increased educational opportunities for homeowners during voluntary inspections or while other mitigation work is being completed.

The Fire Services Specialist is required to provide an annual presentation to City Council for district renewal. Information shared with the Council includes yearly statistics of projects completed. Since 2006 the district has supported the clearing of 220 miles of roadway vegetation, treated 190 acres through fuels management projects, and assessed more than 600 properties for potential defensible space improvement.

While there are many projects funded through the district, the annual chipping program is the most popular, and is run from March to June. The chipping program helps encourage property

owners to manage their defensible space each year in compliance with the City's ordinance. More than 5,100 tons of waste has been removed and chipped since 2008, including 400 tons in 2021.

Since its formation, several wildfires have occurred within the boundaries of the Assessment District including the 2008 Tea Fire, the 2009 Jesusita Fire, and the 2017 Thomas Fire. These three fires collectively resulted in the destruction of more than 1,300 structures across several communities. The highest loss of homes within the City of Santa Barbara occurred during the 2008 Tea Fire, during which more than 150 homes were lost. However, no fires have yet begun within the City of Santa Barbara (including within the Assessment District) and spread into surrounding wildland areas. These wildfires show the continued need for vegetation management and defensible space in hazardous areas like the Foothill and Extreme Foothill High Fire Hazard Areas within the City.



Fire Services Specialist, Chris Braden, providing a local homeowner with a Defensible Space consultation. Image: Santa Barbara Fire Department



Crews clear vegetation in the City of Santa Barbara as part of the annual Assessment District programming. Image: Santa Barbara Fire Department

COLLABORATION & ENGAGEMENT

As there is no enforcement mechanism within the structure of the Assessment District, including funding for any staff to enforce regulations, violations of city code must be collaboratively resolved with other Fire Prevention staff. [Per municipal ordinance](#), property owners must maintain 100 feet of defensible space around any structure located in the Foothill Zone and 150 feet surrounding any structure in the Extreme Foothill Zone. This ordinance is enforced by the Santa Barbara City Fire Department through landscape development permits or upon complaint after installation. Any complaint-driven inspections within the Assessment District are completed by fire department staff, other than the District's Fire Services Specialist, including the City's Wildland Fire Specialist who works in all High Fire Hazard Areas within the city.

Unlike the Fire Services Specialist, the Wildland Fire Specialist is a fire department employee whose salary is funded through the City's General Fund to work city-wide addressing wildfire hazards. This collaboration is essential to maintain a fire-safe community within the Assessment District.

INNOVATIONS

Along with the City of Oakland, Santa Barbara was previously the only incorporated jurisdiction to utilize Proposition 218 to create a special district for wildfire prevention. Unlike Oakland's Wildfire Prevention Assessment District, which was repealed by voters in 2013, Santa Barbara's District must only be reapproved by City Council and does not need to be reauthorized by voters. This has allowed uninterrupted funding to support wildfire mitigation activities to continue for almost two decades.

A [2016 study](#) by graduate students at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), found that the fuel management completed within the assessment district is, based on their models, successfully reducing fire intensity (including flame length and rate of spread) under normal and extreme wind conditions (60mph). Their model found that the fire risk was reduced between 60% and 80% when they compared pre- and post-treatment fuel loads.

While the Assessment District currently only operates in the Foothill and Extreme Foothill Zones of the City, a future ballot initiative could expand the district, or create a new district that covers other areas of the city with wildfire hazard so more homeowners can benefit from chipping, vegetation management, and roadside clearance programs.

FUNDING SOURCE

There are currently 3,200 parcels with homes that pay the assessment fee, which raises approximately \$290,000 annually for wildfire mitigation work, program management, and Fire Services Specialist wages. Although the Assessment District provides critical funding source, demand for mitigation work exceeds funds collected from the district. In 2021, the Santa Barbara City Council approved an additional \$100,000 for vegetation management from the General Fund. The Fire Services Specialist position responsibilities also include pursuing grants to expand the amount of the mitigation work that can be undertaken each year.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

REPLICABILITY

For communities considering creating a Special Assessment District to support wildfire mitigation work, the City of Santa Barbara's process offers several key insights:

1. *Other communities may consider a similar hybrid approach to Santa Barbara's Wildland Fire Suppression Assessment District, where staff funded by the special assessment have no enforcement powers, but other City or Fire Department staff do to initially appeal to voters hesitant to pass an assessment that may lead to additional fines*
2. *An assessment completed by graduate students at the University of California, Santa Barbara found that were at least 80 communities across California that would have suitable conditions to benefit from a similarly structured assessment district.*
3. *Creating metrics and tracking progress helps show how funds are being successfully spent to reduce wildfire threat, increasing the likelihood of continued support from the*



Fire Services Specialist, Chris Braden, sharing information about free defensible space inspections. Image: Santa Barbara Fire Department

public and elected officials, and resulting in district renewals.

RESPONDING TO DATA, STATE REGULATIONS, & CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

According to the [Central Coast Regional Report](#) of the 4th California Climate Assessment, it is difficult to project future wildfire conditions due to uncertainty of predictions of precipitation and wind (which often drives extreme fire behavior in the fall and winter months). However, the report acknowledged that because the Mediterranean type of ecosystem that is prevalent in the region is dominated by fire regimes, it is likely the region will continue to see wildfire events that occur in the WUI communities of Santa Barbara. Other climate impacts including drought and extreme heat, as well as the potential for post-fire debris flows may impact communities already exposed to wildfire hazards.

Any increase in wildfire activity will likely create elevated hazards for communities located in the Wildland Fire Suppression Assessment District, particularly as previous wildfires resulted in the loss of hundreds of homes within the City of Santa Barbara. Work done to mitigate future and existing wildfire hazards through the programs funded by the Assessment District will protect communities in the future, regardless of projected risk.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information, please visit the [City of Santa Barbara's Wildland Fire Suppression Assessment District webpage](#).

This case study is part of a series of Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Planning Best Practices. Each case study focuses on a specific planning tool (or set of tools) that a community is utilizing to reduce risk and build resilience to wildfire across the state of California. This project is part of [California Climate Investments](#), a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment – particularly in disadvantaged communities.

