

## City of Austin Funds New Fire Safety Measures

By Sloan Wyatt

AUSTIN, TX — At first, she thought it was snowing. The white, speckled flecks falling from the sky looked like snowflakes to then 12-year-old Anna Fletcher. Snow, however, is an anomaly in Texas and even more preposterous in late fall. Then, she heard the sirens blaring through her neighborhood, and she knew that the white flecks were not snowflakes. They were ash.

Fletcher, now a sophomore nutrition major at the University of Texas, still remembers playing outside in her backyard that afternoon. The 2012 wildfire in Steiner Ranch made it hard for her to forget. Even though the fire began over a mile away, it quickly tore through her neighborhood, displacing families for days.

“If you weren’t home when the cops evacuated the neighborhood, you couldn’t go back home,” Fletcher said. “Pets were left alone in their houses for days. Some of my friends’ pets died because their owners couldn’t go back to the neighborhood.”

She is one of the thousands of Austinites affected by a growing threat in their city: wildfires.

CoreLogic, a California-based provider of data and analytics, this year ranked Austin as the fifth-highest metro area at risk of wildfires in the western United States. The four other cities were all in California.

Those most at risk are people who live within the wildland-urban interface, a transitional zone between the wildland and developed areas. Sixty-one percent of homes in Austin are within this interface, making the potential of wildfires a reality for most Austinites.

On Oct. 31, the Austin City Council approved an ordinance that authorized \$274,360 from Federal Emergency Management Agency's Assistance to Firefighters Grant. This money was appropriated into the 2019-2020 fiscal year for the Austin Fire Department's Operating Budget and allocated for "internal training," according to Austin Fire Department Public Information Officer Michelle Tanzola.

"The funding will be used to reimburse expenses for the training and establishment of the Sim Lab required to complete certification in the Blue Card Incident Command System," said Cristina Masters, communications & policy aide to district 8 councilmember Paige Ellis.

Masters noted that wildfire prevention is one of the city's "main issues" at the moment.

Assistance to Firefighters Grants protects the public and firefighters from fire-related hazards through financial assistance that may fund fire departments, emergency medical service organizations and state fire training academies. These grants finance equipment, protective gear and vehicles, among other necessary resources needed for fire hazard prevention and safety.

Alongside grant money, the Austin City Council approved a resolution that outlined the construction of five fire stations over the next six years. These stations will help meet the demands of Austin's growing population as well as its increasing wildfires.

District 8 councilmember Paige Ellis applauded the council for the future plans, noting how the time table for the project was ambitious but, hopefully, achievable.

In a memorandum released on Oct. 8, Public Works Director Richard Mendoza assured that construction on stations in the "top two areas of greatest need are to begin within 12 and 24 months respectively with the first one opening in 24 months."

The city is also expanding the automatic aid agreement between the Emergency Management Services districts in central Texas, according to Masters.

These measures could change what is becoming a new reality for Austinites. Unfortunately, for citizens like Xochitl Gostomski, an administrative associate at McCombs School of Business, new fire safety efforts cannot undo the past. In 2009, a wildfire in Bastrop destroyed Gostomski's childhood home, leaving her and her family feeling powerless.

"The state of Texas didn't help us," Gostomski said. "(After the fire), we had to sue the electric company for the damage to our property and the loss of trees."

Wildfires now shape the landscape of Bastrop, according to Gostomski. “Whenever you’re driving, what used to be this hilly beautiful landscape is now this hilly desert of nothing,” Gostomski said.

For others, such as senior finance major Makayla Goertz, wildfires may not have demolished their houses, but the effects still linger. Goertz remembered friends and family members moving away after the 2009 Bastrop wildfire. She also experienced a growing fear — what if this were to happen again?

Texas’ booming population and dry climate make it quite literally a hotbed for wildfires. Citizens are moving outside of suburbs and into forested areas, also known as “wildlands.” Other factors that contribute to these wildfires include a rise in vegetative fuel, rainless summers and insufficient management of the land, according to the Austin Fire Department.

“We treated it like a joke when we were growing up,” Fletcher said. “If we were having a bonfire, we’d joke about putting it out because we didn’t want to start another Steiner fire.”

Fletcher, however, admitted that as she has matured, the reality of the wildfire made her more aware and cautious.

“We saw all of the consequences from that fire,” Fletcher said. “All it took was one spark.”