

Wildfires pose looming threat to Austin residents By Megan Fee

Austin, Texas ranks fifth out of the 15 metropolitan areas in the United States with the highest risk of wildfire. The Urban Forestry Committee of Austin's Environmental Commission worked to combat this looming threat in its Oct. 23 meeting.

The ranking from data and analytics company CoreLogic reported Austin has 53,984 homes at high-to-extreme risk of wildfire and Texas experienced wildfire burns in 569,811 acres in 2018. For Austin's Urban Forestry Board, whose mission is to develop and establish a comprehensive urban forest plan for the planting, maintenance and replacement of trees in public areas, this issue is of prime concern.

"We obviously have a tremendous concern for wildfire right now," said Austin Energy vegetation manager Joseph Osborne during the committee's discussion of new Austin Energy policy.

The policy, which states that no trees shall be planted within 25 feet of the base of a transmission structure, will only impact future developments. Its implementation is essential because tree limbs that rub against power lines can cause voltage fluctuations or outages, damage to the power lines and tree limbs, and dangerous fires.

"Anything around our facilities and infrastructure can drop embers, and if you've got the fuel below, it will start a fire," said Osborne, who recounted several fires in Austin in the last several years that started this way.

"We have contactors that prune our trees," Osborne said, explaining that tree branches are cut away from power lines at a clearance of 11-15 feet for fast-growing species and 7-10 feet for slow-growing species.

Osborne said Austin Energy is trying to partner with groups within the city, such as the Parks and Recreation Department and the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, to prevent having to use extreme measures to thin trees.

"If we have an ice storm, or something of that magnitude, it's going to bring the city to its knees because we will not be able to get the infrastructure back up," Osborne said.

“We’re trying to have access to our facilities, and still be aware of the citizens’ concerns,” said Osborne, pointing out that many of Austin Energy’s distribution lines run through green belts in neighborhoods.

Sharlyn Laplace, resident of Steiner Ranch, recalled one terrifying Labor Day weekend in 2011 where the threat of wildfire became a reality.

“It was super scary. You had thousands of people with nowhere to go, and it took hours, and hours, and hours for people to get out,” Laplace said, noting that people broke into windows to notify their neighbors and rescue pets.

Laplace credited the fire to a combination of drought, intense summer heat and extremely heavy winds.

She also said people are usually in favor of planting trees to make the area more beautiful, but if they have not personally experienced the devastating aftermath of a wildfire, they may not fully understand the consequences.

“The power lines go for miles in the natural terrain around us,” Laplace said. “It could easily happen again.”

Though all committee members recognized the importance of this concern, each added thoughts of their own.

“The homeowners are very much aware of why they bought there, and their risks, and they’re heavily insured,” said district 9 commissioner Linda Guerrero. “Not to minimize this, but let’s not get too fear based either.”

Commissioner Pam Thompson of district 3 suggested tree canopy heights could be regulated so they would never grow to the height of the wires.

Differing opinions aside, the commissioners all agreed that educating citizens on what tree species are appropriate to plant near power lines is a vital step.

“I think that’s a good idea, because when people have to go over there and really butcher up those trees for power lines, you’re extremely unpopular,” said district 7 commissioner Peggy Maceo, followed by a laugh from the group.

All members of the committee were passionate about their love for trees. But at the end of the day, Osborne said the ultimate goal is ensuring the safety of Austin citizens.

“We need to think a little bit outside the box here. I understand, we love our trees, and the heritage trees, I get it, but we really need to be careful,” Osborne said in a stern tone as the conversation came to a close at One Texas Center. “We may be setting ourselves up for failure.”