

Fire safety is the objective of wildlife protection plan

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A Community Wildfire Protection Plan is in the works for the Lexington hills, but the effort is still in the early stages. The plan is being developed by the nonprofit Santa Clara County FireSafe Council.

The council is in the process of interviewing fire consultants who would help develop the plan. Two potential candidates were interviewed last week. "It's too early in the process to predict when we might choose someone," said spokesman Allan Thompson. "We have more people to talk to."

Representatives to the FireSafe Council come from a number of organizations such as the Santa Clara County Fire Department, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, CAL FIRE, PG&E, the Santa Clara Valley Water District and the San Jose Water Company. Several people who live in the Lexington area are also on board.

Thompson described the planning process as "a collaborative effort."

"The purpose is to plan how to prevent wildfires and to facilitate grants for that purpose," he said. The federal Bureau of Land Management funds the program, along with contributions from local businesses, agencies and individuals.

The Lexington Hills Community Wildfire Protection Plan is expected to be completed in 2008. In the interim, the FireSafe Council has already launched a chipping program, which is free to area residents. People who clear their land of flammable materials can ask for a chipping contractor to come out and grind up the debris. "It's usually tree limbs and branches and brush," Thompson said. Homeowners are encouraged to clear flammable materials from a space of at least 100 feet around their homes and 30 feet from roadways or driveways used for evacuation purposes.

There is also a special needs assistance program for people who are unable to clear their own property. To qualify, homeowners must be more than 65 years old and physically disabled. Low-income guidelines also apply.

CWPPs have already been developed for East San Jose's Alum Rock Park area, as well as for the south county location where the 2002 Croy Fire burned 3,127 acres and 34 structures.

Ten field surveys were made of the Croy Fire area as part of the CWPP process. Among other things, the CWPP recommends the FireSafe Council continues its outreach and education programs and consider doing more home inspections to identify at-risk properties.

The Lexington Hills CWPP "will follow the same basic process," said Thompson, "but it will be specific to vegetation and different hazards."

In the meantime, the FireSafe Council has developed a 20-page guide that is filled with recommendations homeowners can follow to protect their property.

Lexington Hills is one of 14 communities statewide considered to be at risk for fire danger. Los Gatos, Saratoga and Monte Sereno are also on the list. Residents who are interested in developing a wildfire protection plan for those communities should contact the FireSafe Council.

To find out more about the FireSafe Council and its programs, visit www.SCCFireSafe.org.

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