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Reducing the Risk of Fires Associated with Homeless Encampments in High Fire Hazard Severity Zones

Wildfires are a frequent natural disaster in California, causing significant harm and loss to individuals, communities, wildlife and great swaths of natural landscape and the frequency, duration and size of wildfires have increased over the last several decades. Researchers at UC Irvine reported that the State’s burn season has grown longer and longer over the last 20 years, now beginning in May, rather than June, with the peak shifting from August to July. Los Angeles County’s (County) unusually extreme heat, coupled with bone-dry terrain, has created ideal conditions for more rapid spread when fires occur. While most of California is subject to some degree of fire risk, specific features make some areas particularly hazardous. State law requires the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to identify areas based on the severity of fire hazard that is expected to prevail there. These areas, or “zones,” are based on factors such as fuel, slope, and fire weather. There are three zones based on increasing fire hazard: medium, high, and very high. As we go through the 2021 fire season, we must be diligent in reducing the risk of fire, particularly in areas with the

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highest hazard, which are designated Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ).

Concurrently, Los Angeles County currently has the largest unsheltered homeless population in the nation. The 2020 Point-in-Time Homeless Count identified 66,000 County residents experiencing homelessness, 72% of whom are unsheltered. While many People Experiencing Homelessness (PEH) live in our urban centers, a growing number have taken refuge in more remote, mountainous regions. As more people, both housed and unhoused, live within high fire zones, the risk of fires starting and causing harm and loss of life has also increased. Unsheltered PEH may be reliant on fires for everyday survival activities, including cooking food and keeping warm, but these activities also increase the risk of nearby brush catching fire and rapidly spreading. PEH living in high-fire zones may miss emergency notifications and may experience challenges in safely evacuating. Additionally, efforts to notify or evacuate PEH in remote locations can cause undue harm to outreach workers and emergency responders. For these reasons, PEH in unincorporated County designated VHFHSZ pose a clear and imminent danger demanding immediate action to prevent or mitigate loss of, or damage to life, health, property and/or essential services.

In response to the rising incidents of PEH impacted by outdoor elements, the Board of Supervisors (Board) instructed the Chief Executive Office (CEO) to create the Extreme Weather and Emergency Response Plan in 2018 to mitigate the impact that extreme weather has on PEH. As a result of this work, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), in collaboration with the LA County Fire Department (LACoF) and the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department Homeless Outreach Services Team (LASD-HOST), have been conducting proactive outreach focused on the

County's High Fire Hazard Zones (HFHZ). LACoF developed the Homeless Encampment Location Program (H.E.L.P.) to map encampments in high-risk regions, allowing outreach teams to better connect with unhoused residents. As a result of these efforts, hundreds of PEH have been engaged and warned of potential fire dangers. While some of the PEH engaged decided to remain, many willingly agreed to relocate to safer areas. LACoF believes that these preventative efforts significantly reduced the threat of fires during high wind periods.

Despite a significant increase in fire prevention efforts, there are still portions of the County within the designated VHFHSZ where, because of location, access, terrain, and fuels, the risk of a fire starting and rapidly spreading remains incredibly high. As climate change extends and exacerbates our local fire season, particular areas of the Unincorporated County pose too much risk of harm or loss of life for residents, PEH, outreach teams, and first responders, to allow encampments to remain. As we enter what may be the most devastating fire season on record, it's important that we move with urgency to reduce the risk of occurrence and spread. To mitigate the risk of fires, LACoF should prohibit homeless encampments in Unincorporated County designated VHFHSZ's. All necessary efforts to connect PEH in these regions to resources should be led by LAHSA's best practices for addressing street encampments, ensuring that no individual is criminalized simply for not having a home.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Prohibit homeless encampments in Unincorporated County designated VHFHSZ's to prevent the occurrences of fire and loss of life;
2. Direct LACoF and LASD-HOST to provide appropriate notification to the people living in the designated encampments of the prohibition;

3. Direct CEO-HI, in collaboration with LACoF, LAHSA, OEM, and LASD-HOST to identify encampments within Unincorporated County designated a VHFHSZ, provide outreach, and offer resources following LAHSA's best practices for addressing street encampments. Encampments identified for outreach should be prioritized based on risk level associated with location, access, and terrain, and fuels;
4. Direct LACoF, in collaboration with CEO-HI, and LASD-HOST to ensure that VHFHSZ's in Unincorporated County remain free of encampments, while also ensuring these efforts do not criminalize PEH;
5. Direct CEO-HI, in collaboration with LAHSA, and LACoF to provide an initial report back in 30 days on progress rehousing PEH, and an analysis of resources needed to sustain this effort and ongoing progress reports every 60 days thereafter;
6. Direct LACoF to continue to monitor and report back quarterly on fires that have been linked to encampments outside of VHFHSZs and to develop appropriate prevention strategies for areas that have seen multiple incidents; and
7. Find that the proposed actions are not a project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) since they are activities that are excluded from the definition of a project by section 21065 of the California Public Resources Code and section 15378(b) of the State CEQA Guidelines. The proposed actions are organizational or administrative activities of government which will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment. In the alternative, find that the actions are exempt from CEQA as specific actions necessary to prevent or mitigate an emergency pursuant to section 21080(b)(4)

and section 15269(c) of the State CEQA Guidelines.

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