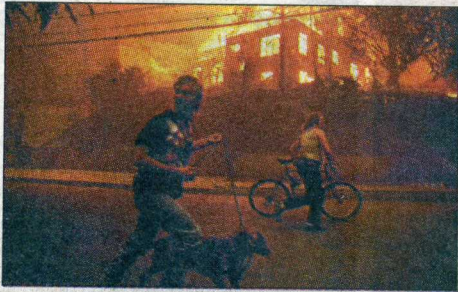


23RD ANNIVERSARY OF OAKLAND HILLS INFERNO



KARL MONDON/STAFF ARCHIVES

Residents flee near a burning home in the 1991 Oakland Hills fire.



GARY REYES/STAFF ARCHIVES

Three homes managed to escape the blaze in this area of Fairlane Drive.



KARL MONDON/STAFF ARCHIVES

A lone firefighter runs past the devastation on Margarido Drive.

Putting fire safety first

Nonprofit is created as funding toward preventing blazes is drying up



LAURA A. ODA/STAFF

Workers remove brush in Oakland's Hiller Highlands this month. A grant paid for East Bay Civicorps, Caltrans and the Oakland Landscape Committee to clear brush on Oakland school property, private land and Caltrans land.

By Doug Oakley

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OAKLAND—It was 23 years ago Monday that Sue Piper and her 9-year-old daughter fled their Oakland Hills home in the face of an inferno that would kill 25 people and turn 3,400 homes into ashes and rubble.

She'll never forget how she followed a line of cars out of the hills as a stand of eucalyptus trees burst into flames next to her and the heat penetrated the car doors.

With that memory in mind, Piper and a group of like-minded Oakland Hills homeowners are

launching the Oakland Firesafe Council, a nonprofit aimed at fire safety education for residents in the area.

The creation of the council comes at an inopportune time, as city money earmarked for fire prevention in the hills is drying up. Voters last year re-

jected a \$68 annual charge per parcel that was raising \$1.7 million a year for removal of highly flammable vegetation on public lands.

"We're trying to mobilize Oakland residents to take the

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steps to protect their homes, their property and their families," Piper said. "We live in harm's way, and when the fire is coming over the hill, it's too late. We will be emphasizing what individuals can do to make a difference."

That includes teaching people what they need to know on a "red flag," or high-risk, fire day, like making sure rain gutters are cleaned out and that vegetation around the home is under control.

The council will be an affiliate of the Diablo Firesafe Council, which also educates about fire prevention in Contra Costa and Alameda counties and goes a step further by providing about \$80,000 a year in grants for vegetation removal.

That amount is nowhere near the \$1.7 million the city of Oakland has been spending each year on removal of vegetation in the hills. That money, however, will be gone in about two years, said Vince Crudele,

supervisor of the vegetation management division of the Oakland Fire Department.

"Now that we don't have that reserve being replenished, we are still looking at things that are fire code-compliant, but we are doing less," Crudele said. "Instead of clearing an entire acre, for example, we're just doing a perimeter cut."

He said the fund has \$869,000 left for vegetation removal, \$15,000 for roving firetruck patrols on hot and dry days, \$49,000 for public outreach, \$35,000 for goat grazing and chipping vegetation from homeowners properties, and \$32,000 for administrative costs. In addition, there is \$700,000 to match grants with.

The city will continue to do vegetation removal until the money is gone, he said. Then the safety situation could become dubious.

"If we don't have the money to make these places safe, and we're not actively out doing these inspections and doing vegetation management, then in the future we could have conditions like we had in 1991, where a

large-scale event is a possibility," Crudele said.

He said the area served by the fire prevention district has a 33-mile perimeter with 10,590 acres and 307 miles of roads and comprises 21 percent of the city's geography.

The fact that Oakland is running out of fire-prevention funding for the hills "does not bode well for fire safety," said Cheryl Miller, executive coordinator of the Diablo Firesafe Council, which will help the Oakland Firesafe Council get off the ground.

"I'm hoping the Oakland fund will go back for a vote and the homeowners will agree it's a worthy assessment," Miller said. "The work now becomes one more city budget item that has to get in line with all the other programs that come out of the general fund. Fire safety is one of those things that unless you are constantly reminded, you get complacent. That's the reality of it."

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