

**ROSS VALLEY FIRE DEPARTMENT  
STAFF REPORT**

For the meeting of November 8, 2023

To: Board of Directors  
From: Kathleen Cutter, Defensible Space Lead  
Subject: Receive Presentation on Defensible Space Program

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**RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Board receive the presentation on the Defensible Space Program.

**BACKGROUND**

In 2020, the public voted to pass Measure C, a parcel tax to fund the Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority (MWPA). The MWPA is working to achieve its mission of reducing the risk of wildfire to the communities of Marin through five main goals: 1) Vegetation Management, 2) Fire Detection, Alerts, and Evacuation, 3) Grants, 4) Public Outreach and Education, 5) Defensible Space and Home Hardening. To read more about MWPA's goals please visit [MWPA goals](#)

The MWPA funding inspired Ross Valley Fire Department (RVFD), Marin County Fire Department (MCFD), Central Marin Fire Department (CMFD), and Kentfield Fire Protection District (KFPD) to pool resources and expertise to provide the best defensible space and home hardening information possible to all their residents. In 2021, the program piloted Fire Aside's Defensible Space Inspection software that advanced the program exponentially. This software captures a broader scope of defensible space and home hardening data allowing program administrators greater insight of defensible space in Marin and provides residents with a comprehensive individualized property report.

**DISCUSSION**

The 2023 season started with significant changes. Southern Marin Fire Protection District became the fifth fire department to join our Defensible Space Program. The program moved its headquarters from its home of two years at the San Geronimo Valley Golf Course to a suite at 1600 Los Gamos in San Rafael. Twenty-six seasonal inspectors were hired to help us achieve our season goals which included: improvement of resident notification of upcoming inspections, motivate residents to resolve identified fire code violations and act on home hardening recommendations, conduct or facilitate follow up inspections for every parcel inspected in 2023,

complete upwards of 17,000 defensible space inspections, and refer unresolved hazards to Fire Prevention Bureau(s) for code enforcement and potential abatement.

In 2023, our inspection program launched a pilot program to record unimproved lots. For the first time, inspectors were instructed to inspect unimproved lots within neighborhoods. RVFD is working with Fire Aside to produce a physical letter to send to the mailing address of the owners of unimproved lots informing them of their obligations to maintain their lands to reduce wildfire risk.

Furthermore, the comprehensive online residential report available to inspected properties and data collection has advanced. Residents can apply for MWPA home hardening and defensible space grants and submit photographic evidence of the mitigation work they have completed directly through their online report. The report has better graphics and improved layout to make it more digestible and user friendly. The data gathered by the software allows us to track how many inspections have been completed, mitigation work that has been accomplished, hazards that are present, and inspector performance.

#### Inspection Process:

Every year half of our responsibility areas are scheduled to receive defensible space inspections based on the Mutual Threat Zones (MTZ). (This interactive map can be found at [Marin MTZ \(Lynx 2021\)](#) ).

Approximately a week before inspectors start inspecting a neighborhood, communities are notified through “press releases” pushed through the RVFD, the local firewise sites, and through town newsletters/notifications. While inspecting, inspectors place sandwich boards with the message “Wildfire Mitigation Defensible Space Inspectors in Your Neighborhood” at highly visible--and safe--locations in the area being inspected.

Each day inspectors are sent to specific assigned maps in one to three neighborhoods throughout Marin. Once a neighborhood is inspected, inspectors move on to the next neighborhood on the schedule.

During an inspection, residents are invited to accompany the inspectors during the inspection of their property. Inspectors do not access properties without permission of the tenant or owner. If no one is home or access is denied, the inspector inspects from the street obeying laws of curtilage. This means they are allowed to record findings from what they observe from the street and on their path to the property’s front door. They do not pass through any locked gate they confront on their path to the front door.

Every inspection results in a comprehensive report for the property owner that can be accessed online by the owner using a unique code given to them or left at their door by the inspectors. Residents can access these reports 24 hours after their property inspection has been completed. There, residents can view defensible space action items they have to complete to be in compliance with the fire code, as well as action steps that are recommended. Additionally, residents will discover some ways to lessen the threat created by home construction vulnerabilities, as well as resources such as grants, chipper days, Alert Marin, and Nixle.

Reporting:

In years past, we reported how many inspected properties were either “compliant” or “non compliant”, we no longer do this as we find this misleading. One tends to think that “compliant houses” are safe and that “non compliant houses” are unsafe. Technically, a house is “out of compliance” if it has leaf litter accumulated against a structure. A wood shingled house with a 150 foot fence attached to it “is compliant” yet this “compliant” house is arguably more at risk from wildfire than the “non-compliant” house. If the fence ignites, it provides a fuel pathway to the wood shingled “compliant” house likely resulting in its demise. Leaves igniting against “non-compliant” stucco houses are less likely to result in catastrophic loss. In short, whether a home is well prepared to withstand a wildfire can’t necessarily be determined by its compliance designation. This explains the development of our robust residential report that details vegetation and material hazards around the home as well as structural vulnerabilities. Currently, the data we have entered into our Fire Aside Defensible Space Inspection software helps us to determine what the hazards are, where they are located, points to possible mitigation efforts, and helps us to identify needs. In the future, the data points gathered by our software will also have additional overlay of environmental factors to help us better understand the overall fire risk in Marin.

Below you will find data collected during our 2023 Defensible Space inspections for the Ross Valley Fire Department’s jurisdiction. Our season officially ended October 12, 2023. We completed nearly 20,000 inspections eclipsing our season goal.

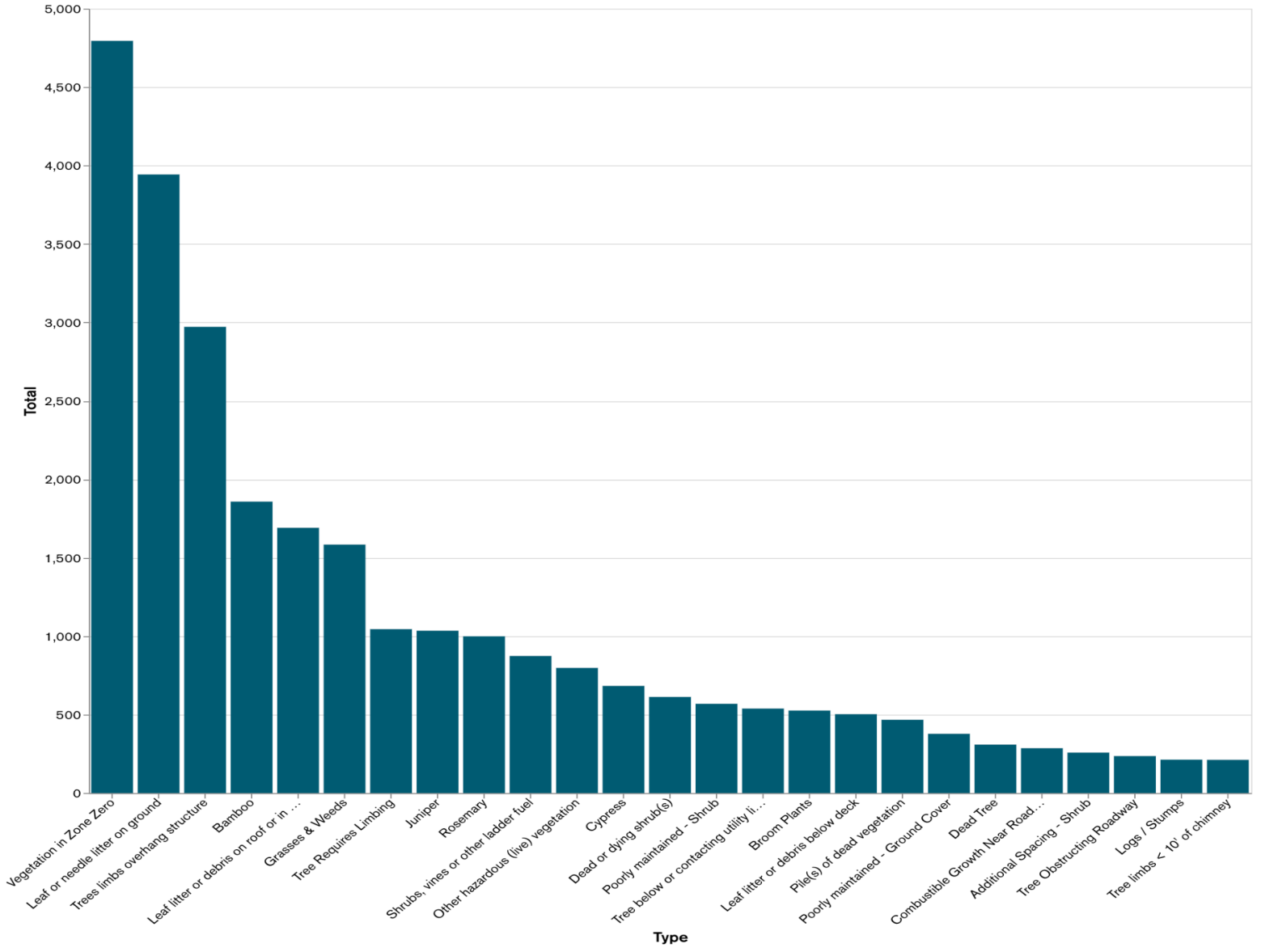
Inspection Numbers:

Nearly 20,000 inspections were conducted by the interagency defensible space program; 4,834 of these were within RVFD’s service area. While 2,502 were first inspections, 2,257 were second or follow up inspections.



**Top 25 Defensible Space issues found in Ross Valley Fire Department's jurisdiction.**

**Top 25 Unresolved DS Items**



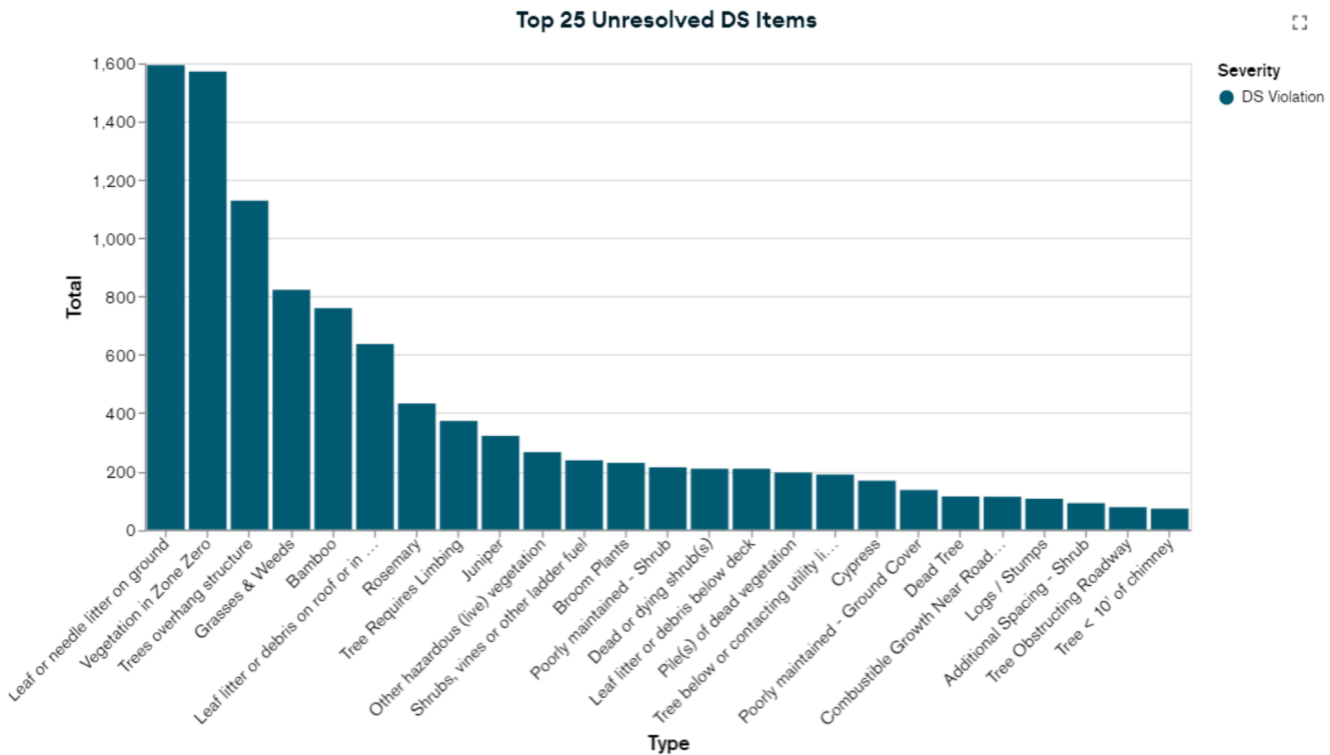
 indicates *Defensible Space (DS) Violation*

## Town of Fairfax

The neighborhoods of Manor Hill (Tamalpais), Deer Park, Cascade Canyon, and Forrest Ave. were inspected during this year’s inspection season.

Additionally, for the first time, our inspectors recorded hazardous vegetation findings on unimproved lots within the built community of Cascade Canyon. By definition unimproved lots do not have structures to protect, therefore vegetation issues do not threaten structures on that property and thus do not trigger a defensible space inspection for that parcel. However, it is recognized that unimproved lots may have hazardous conditions that could pose a threat to homes/structures within close proximity on adjacent properties. Therefore, Ross Valley Fire Department’s prevention office is piloting a program in coordination with our Defensible Space Inspection (DSI) software application’s developers to devise next steps to bring properties in violation into compliance.

Inspections Completed	1,452
Re-inspections Completed	1,356
Total Inspections	2,857
Defensible Space Violations	5,028
Report Open Rate	48.5%



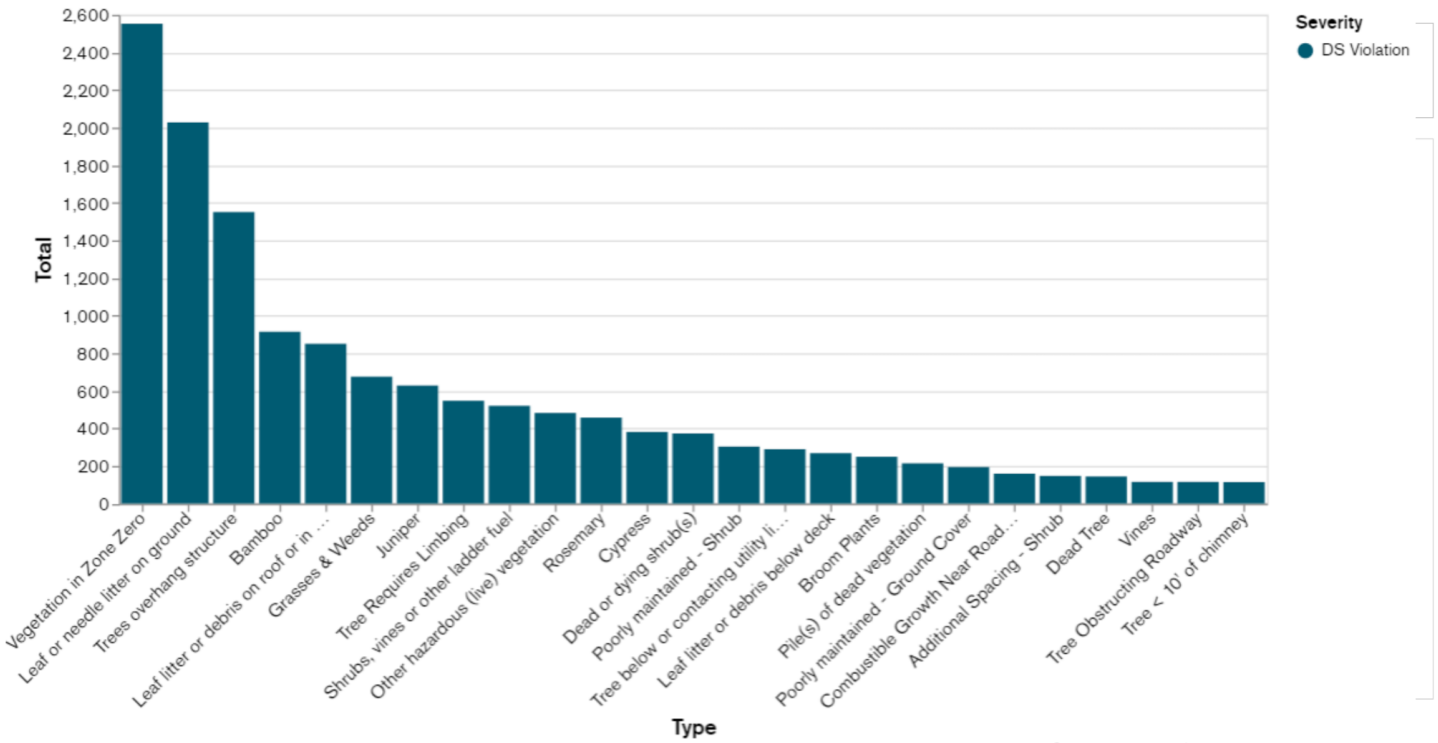
Town of Fairfax

## Town of San Anselmo

The Seminary Neighborhood and portions of Sequoia and San Francisco Blvd. neighborhoods were inspected in 2023. A few of these neighborhoods were inspected last year and because they had a higher incidence of defensible space violations, they were selected to be inspected again this year.

Inspections Completed	858
Re-inspections Completed	723
Total Inspections	1,605
Defensible Space Violations	3,153
Report Open Rate	49.4%

**Top 25 Unresolved DS Items**



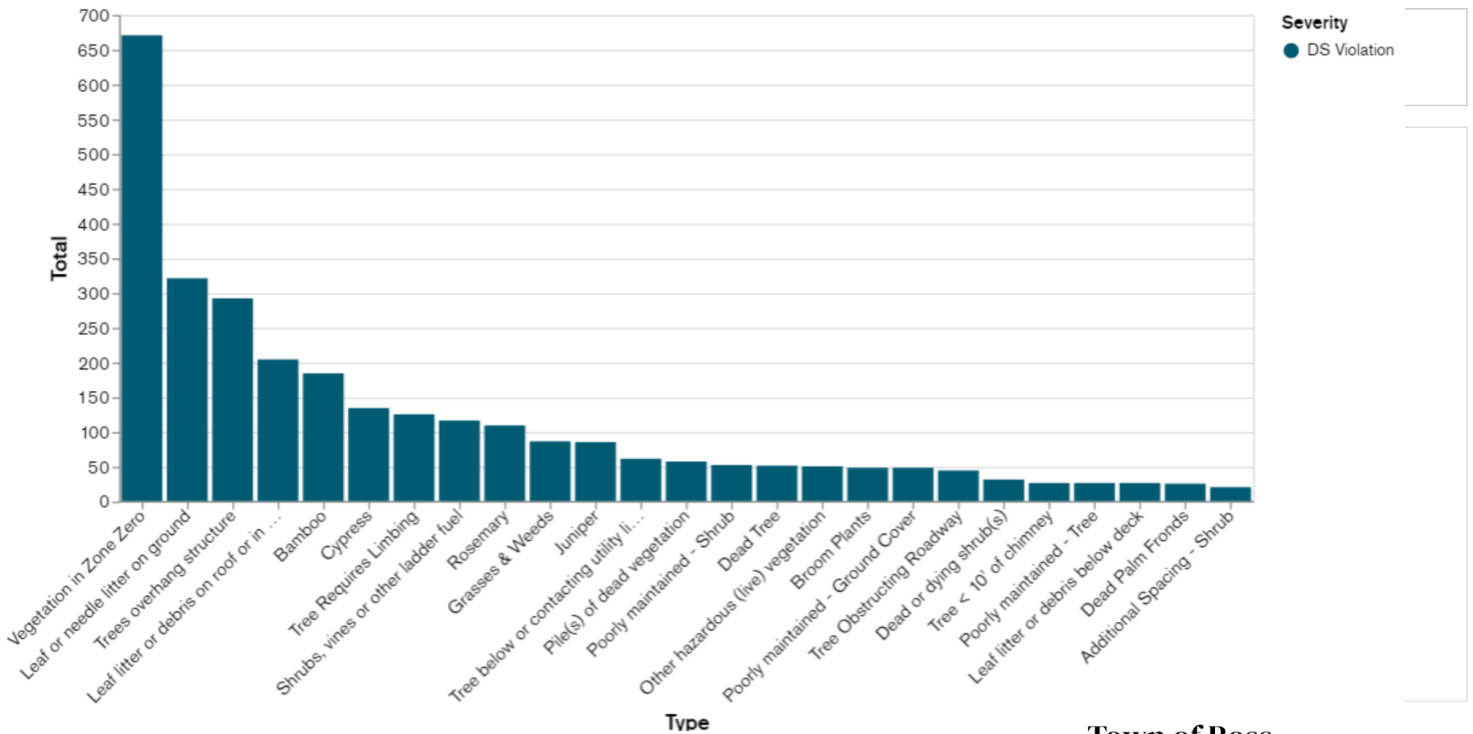
**Town of San Anselmo**

## Town of Ross

Ross neighborhoods East of Sir Francis Drake Blvd. were inspected in 2023, with the exception of the Wellington neighborhood, which was inspected last year. Wellington extends into San Anselmo and the entire neighborhood exists within the very active Barber/Winship Firewise USA Site. We ask Firewise Sites to notify their residents of our upcoming inspections via newsletters and emails; rather than confusing residents by only inspecting half of their properties, we inspected all of Wellington in 2022.

Inspections Completed	188
Re-inspections Completed	187
Total Inspections	368
Defensible Space Violations	599
Report Open Rate	47.3%

**Top 25 Unresolved DS Items**



**Town of Ross**

**Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District**

In 2022, every Sleepy Hollow parcel was inspected twice. As we inspect every property every other year, no inspections were performed in Sleepy Hollow in 2023 with the exception of a few inspections requested by residents. The Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District did use data from previous Defensible Space Inspection reports to help identify and mitigate hazardous vegetation on properties through their direct assistance program. Sleepy Hollow will be inspected in 2024.

Inspections Completed	4
Re-inspections Completed	0
Total Inspections	4
Defensible Space Violations	0
Report Open Rate	75%

**FISCAL IMPACT**

Funding for the defensible space program is provided by the Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority (MWPA); therefore, there is no other fiscal impact to the department.