



CITY OF ALBANY CITY COUNCIL AGENDA STAFF REPORT

Agenda Date: March 3, 2025

Reviewed by: NA

SUBJECT: Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan (2025) and Grant Application to the USDA Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grants (CWDG) Program
Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015)

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SUMMARY

The agenda item includes a presentation of the final Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan for Council approval. In addition, a recommendation for Council to authorize a grant application to the USDA Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grants (CWDG) Program for the first construction project outlined in the Plan, including ongoing costs for habitat restoration, partnership support, and workforce development.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

That the Council adopt Resolution No. 2025-10:

1. Approving the Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan;
2. Authorizing staff to submit an application for grant funding to the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grants Program, and authorizing the City Manager to enter into a grant agreement and expend grant funds should a grant be awarded.

CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT (CEQA)

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is a formal process that requires public agencies to consider and disclose to the public the environmental implications of their actions. The CEQA process involves four possible levels of environmental review, with “categorical exemptions” allowed for certain classes of projects that are not expected to have a significant effect on the environment and therefore do not require preparation of environmental documents. City staff have carefully reviewed the Plan, associated technical studies, and CEQA Guidelines, and have determined that the Plan is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15301 “Existing Facilities” of the CEQA Guidelines, which exempts the maintenance and minor alteration of existing landscaping with negligible expansion of use. In addition, the Plan is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15304 “Minor Alterations to Land” of the

CEQA Guidelines, which exempts the minor public alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees, including wildfire fuel management activities. The basis for the categorical exemption determination is provided in the “Notice of CEQA Exemption” (Attachment 7).

At the Parks, Recreation & Open Space Commission discussion of the proposed plan, a comment was received regarding the applicability of CEQA exemptions for projects on sites of more than five acres. Staff has reviewed the CEQA Guidelines, and have concluded that while several CEQA categorical exemptions are limited to projects that are less than five acres, the particular exemptions identified for the Plan do not have the five-acre limitation.

BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2020 staff noticed a sudden decline in the health of many of the Eucalyptus trees on Albany Hill, matching the observations of other professionals in other East Bay communities. Staff took immediate action to gather information and to develop priority next steps.

This effort resulted in reports researching the causes of the declining eucalyptus and assessments of tree condition and risk, fire fuel loads, and monarch habitat on Albany Hill. The Council established the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) and authorized staff to apply for a grant from the State Coastal Conservancy to develop the Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan. The Coastal Conservancy awarded a grant to the City in the amount of \$230,000, which funded Plan development, founding of the Habitat Restoration Internship Program, and a contract extension for Urban Tilth. The Plan, which incorporated the prior studies and included additional analysis and extensive community outreach, is now presented to the Council for adoption.

A general timeline of related activities, including City Council and Parks Recreation & Open Space Commission (PROSC) staff reports and presentations, scientific studies, assessments, and community outreach is presented as follows:

1. **May 13, 2021**: A study sampling declining eucalyptus for pathogens by researchers from UC Berkeley was reported to PROSC. Results of the **pathogen study** became available on September 21, 2021.
2. **June 7, 2021**: City Council received a report on the status of the condition of Blue Gum Eucalyptus on Albany Hill.
3. **July 23, 2021**: SBCA Tree Consulting arborists submitted a TRAQ Level 1 **report** to staff.
4. **October 18, 2021**: Staff updated the Council on the findings of the following reports: Albany Hill Eucalyptus Tree Survey from SBCA Tree Consulting, Eucalyptus Dieback Report from UC Berkeley, and Water Stress Readings Report from CalFire.
5. **October 18, 2021**: Council adopted **Resolution No. 2021- 105**, authorizing establishment of the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015 – “The Project”) and appropriating \$100,000 from remaining Measure R (1996) capital funds for the Project.

6. **May 2, 2022:** Council adopted [Resolution No. 2022-41](#), which authorized staff to submit an application to the Coastal Conservancy for a Wildfire Resilience Grant in the amount of \$230,000 for the Project. The grant was awarded later in the year and covered development of the Albany Hill Forest Management and Habitat Restoration Plan (the Plan), extended vegetation management services for fuels management on Albany Hill with partner Urban Tilth by an additional year, and enabled the City to establish the Habitat Restoration Internship Program.
7. **May 12, 2022:** Staff updated PROSC on the Project, including a [higher-level tree assessment](#), conducted by McNeil Arboriculture Consultants.
8. **December 8, 2022:** Staff presented another update to PROSC on the Project, including sharing findings from the fire fuel load and expanded monarch habitat studies. Staff continues to partner with monarch expert Stuart Weiss, Creekside Science, throughout the Project.
9. **June 20, 2023:** Council awarded Contract No. 23-40 ([Resolution No. 2023-48](#)) to Restoration Design Group (RDG)/Nomad Ecology for development of the Plan.
10. **September 5, 2023:** The City Council held a Study Session and received a summary of actions completed to date on the Project, including the completed studies on [fire fuel load risk](#) and [assessment of monarch habitat](#) on all open spaces of Albany Hill. Staff and consultants outlined intended next steps, and Council provided feedback and guidance on the Plan and the Project.
11. **November 8, 2023 (Presentation of the Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan); December 3, 2023 (Public Education Session Site Walk video); and March 14, 2024 (Parks, Recreation & Open Space Commission Meeting video):** City staff and the City's consultants conducted a community workshop, a site walk, and a community design session to inform and calibrate development of the Plan. These events were intended to both inform and educate residents about the Project as a whole, and solicit feedback on the community vision for Albany Hill and the Plan.
12. **November 18, 2024:** Council authorized an appropriation of \$100,000 ([Resolution No. 2024-78](#)) to fund additional work on the Plan and renew support for any necessary forest management activities performed while the Plan was in development.
13. **September 12, 2024 (meeting video); February 13, 2025:** Consultants and staff presented the Plan at PROSC meetings.

All documents are posted to the City's website at <http://www.albanyvca.org/albany-hill>.

The [CWDG Program](#) was established in 2022, funded for a five year period with \$1 billion in federal funds through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Funds have been paid out over three cycles to date and have funded projects with similar intentions nationwide.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Plan includes a series of reports and diagrams detailing the range of activities needed to implement the Plan's goals, including tree removals, habitat restoration, monarch habitat management, implementation of erosion best management practices and protective measures, and long-term maintenance.

The Plan divides City property containing eucalyptus into areas based on fire hazard, presence of monarch habitat, areas of native plant populations, and ease of access. These areas receive different treatments at different times. The Plan outlines three projects consisting of tree removals and habitat restoration in the treatment areas. The three projects would be executed over several years based on funding and the changing conditions in the field. Implementation drawings are also included with the Plan.

Project Plan and Timeline

If approved by the City Council, staff will prepare an application to the CWDG Program, which has had a due date extension until March 14, 2025. Included in the application will be costs for construction, habitat restoration, and workforce development including support for ongoing partnerships with Urban Tilth, the Indigenous Groups, and our own Habitat Restoration Internship Program. Staff will also continue to research additional grants to help fund implementation.

When funding is obtained, staff will begin preparing bid documents and any necessary requests for proposals for the tree removals portion of the Plan. The City has a well-established relationship with local nonprofit Urban Tilth as mentioned previously, who provide habitat restoration, wildfire resilience, and general vegetation management services to the City in the City's natural and open spaces. Staff will work with Urban Tilth to incorporate additional restoration tasks and develop more robust habitat management support as outlined in the Plan.

Short-term Mitigations

Until the Plan is fully implemented, staff will inspect the hill daily. If certain trees look like they may pose an immediate hazard, steps will be taken to trim or remove them.

The vegetation maintenance contractor, Urban Tilth, will continue fire-reduction work on the hill, including pruning limbs away from fire roads, removing downed bark and branches, and mowing grasses. Another agenda item at this meeting includes an authorization to extend the City's contract with Urban Tilth.

Since the inception of the Project, the City has performed specific removals of trees that were dead, dying, or leaning along roads and trails and posed a more imminent safety concern. In September 2021, staff worked with a tree company to prune a large limb of one tree and cut down 13 trees deemed as high priority removals.

In September 2022, staff worked with Cal Fire National Guard Hand Crews to fell 13 more trees considered high priority removals, and logs from select trees were milled onsite by Bay Area Redwood into lumber for retaining walls and railings on the hill. This pilot project highlighted ways that material from future felled trees can be kept onsite and reused.

In September 2024, the City contracted with a tree company to conduct additional high priority tree removals on Albany Hill. Twenty-five trees growing on the ledge or slope above the ledge on the west side of Jackson Street were removed. Thirteen logs from the trees were milled into lumber for retaining walls on Albany Hill and steps for City parks.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

The Project will benefit the environment by maintaining vegetation for fire safety and public access and restoring native ecosystems. Albany Hill is a key environmental resource, and the Project aims to preserve and reinvent the landscape in service of climate change resilience, safety, and recreational enjoyment.

The project is consistent with the goals, policies, and actions of the following plans:

City of Albany Climate Action and Adaptation Plan (2019)

Goal 3: Increase resilience of natural lands and systems. Approach: Manage, restore, and partner to foster resilient natural landscapes. events Action 4.3.2 Continue to manage wildfire risk by implementing vegetation management and fuel reduction programs.

Albany 2035 General Plan, Conservation and Sustainability Element:

- Policy CON-1.3: Conservation of Albany Hill: Protect and restore natural features, native vegetation, and wildlife on Albany Hill.
- Policy CON-2.5: Albany Hill Vegetation Management: Protect the remaining native plant communities on Albany Hill. Vegetation on the Hill should be managed in a way that gradually reduces the extent of the eucalyptus forest and encourages native plants to return.
- Action CON-2.D: Creekside Master Plan Implementation: Implement the vegetation management prescriptions of the Albany Hill Creekside Master Plan, and periodically update the Plan as conditions change.
- Action CON-2.G: Native Plant Restoration: Preserve and enhance native plant communities in the city while encouraging the control or removal of invasive and non-native species.
- Policy CON-5.3: Monarch Butterfly Roosting: Consider potential impacts to Monarch butterfly roosting sites on Albany Hill in any future applications for development, park expansion, trail construction, and fuel reduction on the Hill.
- Action CON-5.D: Monarch Butterfly Surveys: For construction projects that would affect eucalyptus, pine, and cypress groves during the period between September and March, require pre-construction surveys by a qualified biologist to determine if roosting Monarch butterflies are present. In the event winter colonies are identified, require appropriate measures to avoid impacts, such as postponing tree removal until butterflies have left or by designating buffer areas around the affected trees.

SOCIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY CONSIDERATIONS

Development of the Albany Hill Forest Management and Habitat Restoration Plan involved soliciting feedback from community members and organizations through multiple avenues of community outreach. The City and consultants also engaged with Indigenous partners in Plan development.

Ongoing vegetation management work by the Watershed Stewardship Restoration Field Crew of Urban Tilth is critical to keeping Albany Hill safe from fire hazards as well as helping to restore ecosystems on the hill. Their Watershed Stewardship Program employs and empowers young adults who live in Richmond and surrounding communities. Development of the Plan will create future work for the Urban Tilth crew in planting and maintenance of vegetation communities on the hill.

CITY COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVES

Goal 6: Increase Public Health, Safety, and Resiliency

California has seen an increased rate of forest deterioration and wildfire activity in recent years due to climate change. Among other impacts, drought-stricken trees are more susceptible to pathogen-related decay and decline. Addressing the overall health and resiliency of the Albany Hill forest, managing the declining eucalyptus, and designing a thoughtful and holistic plan for long-term habitat restoration is essential to ensuring the longevity of this natural resource.

FINANCIAL SUMMARY

In 2021, the City Council adopted Resolution No. 2021-105, establishing the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) and appropriating budget to the project. The project budget was amended as per Resolution No. 2024-78 with local funds. As previously noted, the City was awarded a grant from the State Coastal Conservancy in the amount of \$230,000, \$140,000 of which was allocated towards development of the Plan.

Funding Source	Appropriated Funds
1996 Measure R Open Space Capital Funds (2304)	\$200,000
Coastal Conservancy Wildfire Resilience Program Grant (1506)	\$140,000
Total Appropriated Budget:	\$340,000

This budget has been allocated to or already expended on development of the Plan, short-term mitigations of individual/small-group tree risks, TRAQ (Tree Risk Assessment Qualification) analysis, fuel load analysis, and monarch habitat analysis.

Staff will prepare the application to the CWDG Program due March 14, 2025 and continue to source additional grant funding options for the project. It is likely that grant funds would be administered on a reimbursement basis should the City receive an award.

Attachments:

1. Presentation Slides
2. Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan (text)
3. Removals Phases Diagrams
4. Restoration Phases Diagrams
5. Plan Design Set
6. Cost Estimate
7. Notice of CEQA Exemption
8. Resolution No. 2025-10