

MAY 15 2025

By: T. Cutts, Deputy

# ***FIRE COUNTRY***

## ***Forging a United Defense in the Backcountry***

### ***SUMMARY***

Since the devastating 2003 Cedar and the 2007 Witch Creek fires, San Diego County has taken important and laudable measures to professionalize fire prevention and response across its unincorporated areas. San Diego County Fire (SDCF)'s partnership with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) has improved response times, equipment and training in the San Diego County Fire Protection District (SDCFPD) while consolidating willing fire protection districts (FPDs)<sup>1</sup>. Outside of SDCFPD, eleven additional FPDs<sup>2</sup> with deep community support likewise provide strong services.

However, given the tragic losses and high costs associated with devastating wildfires -- most recently during the January 2025 Los Angeles fires, and the less-damaging but still significant Lilac and Border 2 fires in San Diego County -- the Grand Jury recommends SDCF:

- accelerate consolidation of additional, willing FPDs
- standardize disparate Fire Code requirements related to defensible space and private controlled burns
- support homeowner and community access to fire readiness certifications which contribute to community safety (and improve potential access to fire insurance)

SDCF, through consolidation and policy leadership, plays an increasingly important role across all the unincorporated areas. Effective fire prevention and response would benefit from unity of effort across fire districts and their communities.

## ***BACKGROUND***

Since the tragic 2003 Cedar Fire the Grand Jury has paid close attention to San Diego County programs to address wildfire prevention and response in unincorporated areas. The most recent report<sup>3</sup> commended actions taken by what was then known as the San Diego County Fire Authority (SDCFA) in close partnership with CAL FIRE to improve round-the-clock fire services across the unincorporated areas and to consolidate 15 (of 28) rural FPDs.

In recent years fire risk has intensified. In 2024 CAL FIRE reported the County responded to 32 fires with more than 10 acres of destruction each,<sup>4</sup> a decade record. Most of these occurred in unincorporated areas. Development along the urban-wildland interface has expanded continuously, with County estimates suggesting the potential for 60,000 additional residential units.<sup>5</sup> Industrial expansion is also underway in unincorporated areas, including at least 10 projects under review for the construction of additional Battery Energy Storage Systems.

Much of the unincorporated area of the County is rated as a High or Very High Fire Hazard zone by CAL FIRE.<sup>6</sup> In 2025 Santa Ana winds blew through the County at a speed of 102 mph, greatly increasing fire danger.<sup>7</sup> San Diego County has been alert to the peril. In 2018 County voters approved including the role of the fire authority in the County's Charter,<sup>8</sup> effectively establishing fire prevention and response as a formal responsibility. The 2019 consolidation of the Julian Cuyamaca FPD marked the completion, by SDCFA, of the Board of Supervisors-approved 2008 "Hybrid Plan" to convert primarily volunteer fire departments in some unincorporated areas into professionally staffed 24-hour operations with improved equipment, training and resources.<sup>9</sup> In 2020 the SDFCA changed its name to SDCF,<sup>10</sup> with the mission to,

“Coordinate, regionalize, and improve fire protection and emergency response services provided to the unincorporated areas of San Diego County”<sup>11</sup> and administer the SDCFPD. In 2023 SDCF led a countywide effort to update Fire Mitigation Fees in each of the 12 FPDs<sup>12</sup>, the first significant update in more than a decade to ensure developers underwrite a fair portion of new fire response costs associated with their projects.

While the County has a single Consolidated Fire Code, each of the 12 FPDs has unique provisions within that code. Each FPD is responsible for code enforcement in its area.<sup>13</sup> There are multiple additional authorities with fire prevention, mitigation and response responsibilities in the unincorporated areas (state, federal, tribal, military, utility, etc.), and through a network of mutual assistance agreements, they generally share resources, respond cooperatively, and collaborate cohesively to address fire emergencies<sup>14</sup>.

As part of its commitment to enhanced fire (and emergency) preparedness and response in the unincorporated areas of the County, the Board of Supervisors has increased associated budgets substantially year on year, rising from \$56 million in FY20-21<sup>15</sup> to a proposed budget of \$135 million in FY 24-25.<sup>16</sup> These resources have been invested in augmenting and training personnel, improving and updating equipment, building adequate facilities, expanding emergency medical access across much of the region covered by SDCFPD, and promoting community support and engagement.<sup>17</sup>

## ***PROCEDURE***

The San Diego County Civil Grand Jury thanks all those who contributed time and resources to this investigation. We commend the dedicated professionals who lead and staff all the FPDs, and the many volunteer community leaders who serve on fire district boards, fire safety councils, and community response teams.



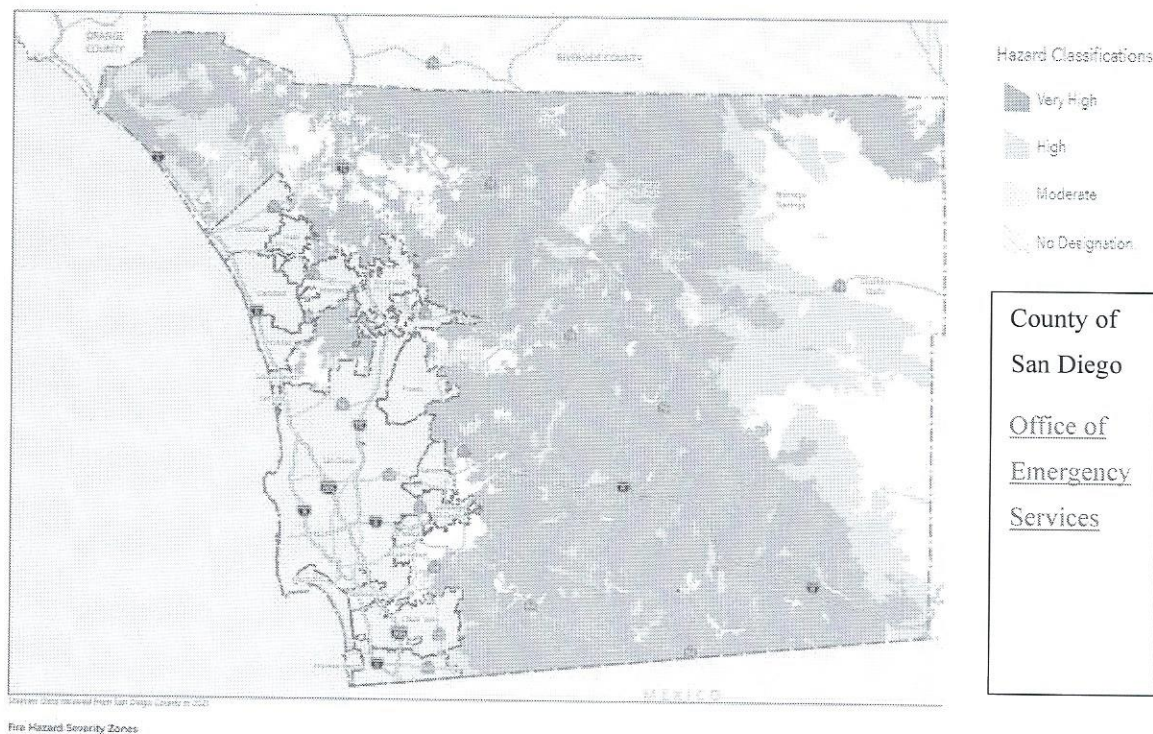
Our research included:

- Document reviews:
  - SDCF Strategic Plan
  - Board meeting minutes and reports from FPDs
  - County Board of Supervisor minutes and staff reports
  - Local Agency Formation Committee San Diego (LAFCO) Municipal Service Reviews and other reports
  - San Diego County Taxpayers Educational Association assessments
  - CAL FIRE resources
- Interviews:
  - SDCF employees
  - Employees and board members of FPDs
  - Local and County fire safety council members
  - FPD board members
  - LAFCO
- Site visits to FPDs
- Past Grand Jury Reports
  - “Back-Country Fire Protection: Where Are We Today,” County of San Diego Civil Grand Jury 2014-2015
  - “The Fire Next Time: Will We Be Ready,” County of San Diego Civil Grand Jury, 2008-2009
  - “Brush-Wind-Fire: An Active Approach to Preventing Future Tragedies,” County of San Diego Civil Grand Jury 2004-2005
  - “Is There a Need For a Regional Fire Authority and Rescue Helicopters In San Diego County?” County of San Diego Civil Grand Jury 2003-2004

## ***DISCUSSION***

The drought conditions and high winds that exacerbated the damaging January 2025 Los Angeles fires also fueled five fires in San Diego County.<sup>18</sup> The two largest, the Lilac and the Border 2 fires, collectively destroyed over 6,000<sup>19</sup> acres but ultimately were not as destructive as those in Los Angeles. As development continues and more residents are exposed to the rising fire risk in unincorporated areas, the County must continue its commitment to consolidating fire services and increasing community commitment to fire prevention.

The pressure for more housing and development and the ongoing role of agriculture in unincorporated areas will all be factors driving demand for emergency services over the next decade. The 2011 County of San Diego General Plan noted 5.6 percent of the total unincorporated area of 3,570 square miles was available for development.<sup>20</sup> In 2011 the County estimated there was space for 60,000 additional residential units in the unincorporated areas; by 2020 it reported 5645 of these units had been constructed.<sup>21</sup> The General Plan stipulated development should be minimized in extreme, very high and high threat areas.<sup>22</sup> Today much of the available land in the unincorporated areas now falls into either the “very high” or “high” category.<sup>23</sup> The 2022 County Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan estimated 421,455 residents of the unincorporated area are vulnerable to wildfires.<sup>24</sup>



### ***Consolidate FPDs***

The 12 current FPDs under County jurisdiction in the unincorporated areas cooperate well within their means, but their resources vary. Property taxes are the main revenue source for most FPDs. The eight FPDs formed before passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 receive a larger share of property tax revenues (as much as 12 percent ) than those formed after 1978 (as little as 2 percent).<sup>25</sup> All FPDs seek additional resources through grants, service fees, special taxes and donations but collectively these form a relatively small percentage of funding. As equipment,<sup>26</sup> construction,<sup>27</sup> and personnel<sup>28</sup> costs increase, some FPDs are struggling to retain staff, upgrade facilities or equipment, and meet the increasing demand for services. In October 2024, the Board of Supervisors agreed to increase the property tax allocations for Deer Springs and Valley Center FPDs from 2.1 percent to 6 percent each but noted continued disparities in fire protection resources across the unincorporated areas.<sup>29</sup>



Both Ramona (2022)<sup>30</sup> and Borrego Springs (2023)<sup>31</sup> cited financial considerations in their respective decisions to approach SDCF and request that SDCFPD assume their fire protection responsibilities. Each received new personnel and equipment as well as commitments to improve facilities as part of their transition to SDCFPD. The Ramona and Borrego Springs experiences speak to the efficacy and value of further consolidation of fire services under SDCF. Most of the 11 FPDs outside SDCFPD generally have earned strong community support for their team members, an issue for some communities considering the prospect of change and concerns about retaining known fire station staff. Ramona fire protection professionals were already part of CAL FIRE when Ramona transitioned fire protection to SDCFPD.<sup>32</sup> When Borrego Springs transferred fire protection, current fire response staff were given the opportunity to sign on with CAL FIRE, a significant confidence-building measure for the community<sup>33</sup>. Of the 11 FPDs outside SDCFPD, only Deer Springs currently contracts with CAL FIRE.<sup>34</sup> In 2023 Deer Springs signed a Memorandum of Agreement with SDCF<sup>35</sup> referencing, among other items, an “operational consolidation” “to operate at emergency incidents as one agency,” with SDCF providing funding for multiple Deer Springs FPD positions through 2029. Clearly, Deer Springs is a proximate opportunity for further consolidation, but it should not be the last.

### ***Uniform Fire Code***

The County publishes a single Consolidated Fire Code which includes distinct requirements defined by each of the 12 FPDs. Each FPD is responsible for inspections and code enforcement in its area of operations. The Consolidated Fire Code website includes a link for each FPD’s unique defensible space code defining the areas around a home or structure that must be free of combustible materials or brush; however two of the links no longer work.<sup>36</sup> In February 2025 the Governor signed an executive order requiring publication of new regulations on defensible space by the end of the year.<sup>37</sup> The County would benefit from defining uniform defensible space guidelines and enforcement in the highly vulnerable unincorporated areas.

Similarly, each FPD lays out distinct requirements for open burn permits (within statewide guidance administered by CAL FIRE and countywide guidance issued by the San Diego Air Pollution Control District).<sup>38</sup> Each FPD details distinct permitting requirements and is responsible for their enforcement. For example, the criteria for the size of burn piles varies from district to district. Alpine FPD accepts a maximum burn pile size of 12' by 8',<sup>39</sup> whereas Lakeside FPD limits the burn pile size to 10' by 10' in winter but 4' by 4' in summer,<sup>40</sup> and San Miguel FPD limits the burn pile size to 3' by 3' year-round.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Support to Homeowners, Communities***

High fire risk has contributed to a struggle for fire insurance for some homeowners. In 2023 the California Department of Insurance<sup>42</sup> reported that 62,683 San Diego County residents did not get their fire insurance renewed. State law<sup>43</sup> requires insurance companies to consider home hardening efforts and community fire planning when making coverage decisions. All communities in unincorporated areas should receive equivalent guidelines and support for home hardening and defensible space improvements that could improve their prospects for fire insurance individually or as a community. While there are several active programs, they are not universally supported across the County. All programs require homeowners to meet stringent fire safety standards that are quickly becoming the new normal. Success will require FPDs to work closely with community-led fire safety councils to help homeowners meet those stringent hardening standards. FPDs may also need to help with inspections to verify required improvements.

Programs currently active in some of the unincorporated areas of the County include:

Firewise USA: This program of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) certifies communities that have voluntarily taken defined steps to harden their homes and neighborhoods against fire. California's "Safe from Wildfires" legislation requires insurers to recognize the "Firewise" designation with potential reductions in fire insurance premiums.<sup>44</sup> Alpine is the only



FPD to achieve certification; nine other communities across the County have also been certified.<sup>45</sup>

**Fire Risk Reduction Community:** CAL FIRE maintains a statewide list of communities in high-risk fire zones that meet best practices for fire planning. San Diego County is listed, as are the Alpine and Rancho Santa Fe FPDs.<sup>46</sup> Listed communities are competitive for grants and may possibly be eligible for insurance discounts<sup>47</sup>.

**Wildfire Prepared Home:** This program by the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety provides homeowners with specific guidance on measures to take to meet its certification standards. Insurers may consider the certification as they determine whether to issue fire insurance, and at what cost.<sup>48</sup> In October 2024 the Board of Supervisors proposed that SDCF assign one staff person to advise homeowners within the SDCFPD on this program.<sup>49</sup>

## ***FACT/FINDINGS***

**Fact:** Fire risk continues to be a threat across the unincorporated areas of San Diego County.<sup>50</sup>

**Finding 01:** FPDs should expect to require increased resources to effectively prevent and respond to wildfires in the unincorporated areas given rising costs of personnel, construction, and equipment.

**Fact:** Since 2008 SDCF has consolidated operational responsibility for fire services from multiple FPDs into what is currently known as the SDCFPD.<sup>51</sup>

**Finding 02:** Consolidation has improved response times, upgraded equipment, augmented staff, and in other ways improved fire prevention and response across SDCFPD's area of responsibility.

**Fact:** Not all FPDs have the same standards for defensible space and controlled burn permits.<sup>52</sup>

**Finding 03:** Uniform defensible space and burn permit codes contribute to fire prevention efforts across unincorporated San Diego County.

**Fact:** In response to Board of Supervisors' concern, SDCF has designated one SDCFPD official to help homeowners access the Wildfire Prepared Home program<sup>53</sup>

**Finding 04:** Homeowner participation in the Firewise, Fire Risk Reduction Community and potentially the Wildfire Prepared Home program enhance community fire safety and improve potential access to fire insurance.

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

**The 2024/2025 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that San Diego County Fire:**

**R1: Explore consolidation of additional willing FPDs to improve overall efficiency and community safety**

**R2: Lead an effort with current FPDs to standardize defensible space requirements and controlled burn permitting across the unincorporated areas**

**R3: Increase cooperation with FPDs (and their respective fire safety councils) to maximize opportunities for homeowners and communities to meet wildfire hardening standards, receive home inspections, and enhance access to fire insurance**

## ***REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS***

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the

Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors. Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

(a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:

- (1) The respondent agrees with the finding.
- (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

(b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:

- (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
- (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
- (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
- (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor. (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or



personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision-making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required from the:

**Responding Agency**

**San Diego County Fire Protection District**

**Recommendations**

**Date**

**R1-R3**

**5/15/2025**

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<sup>1</sup> Helen N. Robbins-Meyer, "San Diego County Fire – Request for Single Source Procurement of Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)," County of San Diego Board of Supervisors, (May 24, 2022):1, <https://file.sandiegocounty.gov/COB/COBPublicView?id=0901127e80e96e37>

<sup>2</sup> County of San Diego, *Consolidated Fire Code*, §1.001, (2023), [cosd-fire-code.pdf](https://file.sandiegocounty.gov/COB/COBPublicView?FileId=39876527)

<sup>3</sup> County of San Diego Civil Grand Jury, "Back-Country Fire Protection: Where We Are Today," 2014-2015, <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/grandjury/reports/2014-2015/BackCountryFireProtectionReport.pdf>, accessed March 3, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> "2024 Incident Archive," California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, State of California, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2024>

<sup>5</sup> County of San Diego, "Housing Capacity and Production Portal Summary," p.2, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/advance/DevTracker/PortalSummaryReport.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> "Know Your Hazards – Wildfire," Office of Emergency Services, County of San Diego, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://file.sandiegocounty.gov/COB/COBPublicView?FileId=39876527>

<sup>7</sup> Gary Robbins and Teri Figueroa, "Strongest Santa Ana Winds This Winter Expected Monday Night in San Diego County," *San Diego Union Tribune*, January 20, 2025, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2025/01/20/strongest-santa-ana-winds-this-winter-expected-monday-night-in-san-diego-county/>

<sup>8</sup> County of San Diego, *Charter*, §703 (11-6-2018), <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/cob/docs/charter.pdf>

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- <sup>10</sup> County of San Diego, “County Fire Starts New Year with New Name,” December 29, 2020, <https://www.countynewscenter.com/county-fire-starts-new-year-with-new-name/>
- <sup>11</sup> San Diego County Fire, “Strategic Plan 2020-2025,” p.4, <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/sdcfa/documents/StratPlan/StratPlanCtyFire.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> County of San Diego, “Fire Mitigation Fee Program: Fire Mitigation Fee Program Updates February 27, 2023,” March 3, 2025, [https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/sdcfa/documents/fire-advisory-board/2-27-23%20SDCFPD%20Advisory%20Board\\_Fire%20Mitigation%20Fee%20Program%20Updates.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/sdcfa/documents/fire-advisory-board/2-27-23%20SDCFPD%20Advisory%20Board_Fire%20Mitigation%20Fee%20Program%20Updates.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> County of San Diego, *Consolidated Fire Code*, Annex E: Defensible Space Ordinances, (2023), <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/pds/docs/cosd-fire-code.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> County of San Diego, “Operational Area (OA) Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) – Annex B Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid Operations,” September 2022, [https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/oes/emergency\\_management/plans/op-area-plan/2022/EOP2022\\_Annex%20B.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/oes/emergency_management/plans/op-area-plan/2022/EOP2022_Annex%20B.pdf)
- <sup>15</sup> County of San Diego, “Adopted Operational Plan Fiscal Years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, September 2022: p. 255, [https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/auditor/pdf/adoptedplan\\_22-24.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/auditor/pdf/adoptedplan_22-24.pdf)
- <sup>16</sup> County of San Diego, “CAO Recommended Operational Plan Fiscal Years 2024–25 and 2025–26”, May 2024: p. 227, [https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/auditor/pdf/caoplan\\_24-26.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/auditor/pdf/caoplan_24-26.pdf)
- <sup>17</sup> County of San Diego, “CAO Recommended Operational Plan Fiscal Years 2024–25 and 2025–26”, May 2024: p. 227, [https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/auditor/pdf/caoplan\\_24-26.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/auditor/pdf/caoplan_24-26.pdf)
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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> County of San Diego, “General Plan: Chapter Three: Land Use Element,” p. 3-3, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/gpupdate/docs/GP/LandUseElement.pdf>
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- <sup>22</sup> County of San Diego, “General Plan: Chapter Three: Land Use Element,” p. 3-29, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/gpupdate/docs/GP/LandUseElement.pdf>
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- <sup>25</sup> Jim Desmond, “Addressing Inequities in Fire Protection In Communities Served By Underfunded Fire Districts,” County of San Diego Board of Supervisors, July 16, 2024, <https://file.sandiegocounty.gov/COB/COBPublicView?id=0901127e810e1e51>
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- <sup>27</sup> “Rising Material Costs in the Construction Industry and How it Affects Insurance Rates,” Morris and Garritano, July 25, 2024, <https://morrisgarritano.com/resource/rising-material-costs-in-the-construction-industry-and-how-it-affects-insurance-rates/>
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- <sup>29</sup> County of San Diego, “Transcript of October 4, 2024 Board of Supervisors Meeting, p. 22, accessed March 3, 2025, [https://sdcounty.granicus.com/player/clip/3653?view\\_id=9&redirect=true](https://sdcounty.granicus.com/player/clip/3653?view_id=9&redirect=true)
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- <sup>49</sup> County of San Diego, "Enhancing the Fire Safety of Homes While Providing Homeowners Financial Relief with the Cost of Insurance," October 22, 2024, <https://file.sandiegocounty.gov/COB/COBPublicView?FileId=39799044>
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<sup>53</sup> County of San Diego, "Enhancing the Fire Safety of Homes While Providing Homeowners Financial Relief with the Cost of Insurance," October 22, 2024, <https://file.sandiegocounty.gov/COB/COBPublicView?FileId=39799044>