

# Valley Vantage

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## Guest Editorial: Preparing for Climate Change with Fire Resistant Buildings

By Councilman Bob Blumenfeld

The Woodland Hills and Warner Center community will never forget the devastation of the Woolsey Fire, which burned portions of Malibu to the ground. While we are grateful that it didn't jump the fire line at Topanga, it was a painful reminder for me and others to take action now to prevent devastation of large fires in our neighborhoods. Facing the reality of climate change, fires like Woolsey may become the new normal. While we may hope for the best, we need to plan for the worst.



Even before the Woolsey Fire, I was working with experts to make construction more fire resistant. I first introduced new building standards legislation after the 2014 downtown Da Vinci arson fire, that leveled a three-story apartment building under construction. That fire cost \$70 million in property damage to nearby buildings, including the adjacent LADWP building. Luckily no lives were lost.

In 2018 Supervisor Sheila Kuehl asked me to serve on the County's Woolsey Fire Task Force with leaders from the Los Angeles Fire Department, LA County and others, to analyze and produce an after-action report with recommendations to make our region safer from inevitable future fires. Among the conclusions of the report is that local governments need to update building codes to "harden the target" in fire prone areas. I take this recommendation seriously and do not want it to simply sit on the proverbial shelf waiting to say "I told you so" when the next tragedy occurs.

Most don't know that some areas of LA, like Downtown, already have a higher standard for building materials in case of fires. Labeled "Fire District 1," this rule proved to be a good model for large, dense, areas no longer isolated to downtown. It was put in place many years ago before density had really been developed outside of downtown and Hollywood. There is no reason that dense areas in the Valley and around the City shouldn't now be given the same level of protection as those areas - this is why I put forward a motion to expand Fire District 1 to other areas. While this should be common sense, myths and misconceptions regarding my plan to help save lives and property which I'd like to clear up.

What is Fire District 1? It's a set of building codes that apply to denser areas like Downtown, Hollywood, Crenshaw and Century City. For larger developments, wood must be treated with fire retardants. More sprinklers must be installed during construction and after, and it includes other broader safety measures. My legislation expands the existing, strengthened building standards of Fire District 1 to more parts of the city, although only about 4% of the city. The focus of the expansion is on dense areas with a recent history of massive fires. During the Woolsey Fire, my staff and I worked to help the thousands of evacuating residents coming into my district who were worrying about their families, their homes and their futures.

We assisted LAFD in every way possible and we collected and distributed a massive amount of donated food and supplies. At the time a perimeter of trucks and resources were stationed around Warner Center. One of LAFD's worst fears was that the visible wind driven flames could start engulfing buildings around the area - and we came extremely close to evacuating large parts of my district. I vividly remember being at the command post when they were preparing for this possibility. Fortunately, the winds shifted and that outcome was narrowly averted. Communities like Warner Center don't yet have strengthened building codes to protect these people and buildings. Thanks to LAFD's incredible work the damage and fatalities were greatly reduced, but Woolsey showed us how bad the worst can be.

Fire District 1 standards won't stop fires, either wild or manmade, but they can slow down the devastation and offer more life-saving time for first responders. The recommendations I'm proposing were crafted with direction and advice from LAFD, Building and Safety, the City Attorney, and Planning, as well as industry and other experts. I've seen some misinformation spread like "this motion will not allow wood to be used in any construction throughout the city." That's not true. Wood can still be used in all areas, but in Fire District 1 it would need to be treated with fire retardants.

This is critical to reduce fire risk during construction like the Da Vinci fire. And, again, the expanded fire district would only cover 4% of the city and it would not apply to single family homes. I've also heard concerns about cost, especially when we need more housing now than ever. While crafting this legislation I brought up cost many times, and the experts did not have a clear answer. Fire District 1 standards have not made it too costly to build in downtown or Hollywood. Both areas have had a construction boom. Any cost associated with using treated wood or alternative materials is minimal when balanced against the long-term advantages. And, the actual cost of the building materials is a very small portion of the overall cost of any new development.

Overall, this is about emergency preparedness, fire safety and doing what we can to limit devastation as fires happen more frequently. I've met too many residents whose lives were turned upside down by the Woolsey Fire and other fires to ignore the threat of wildfires. Climate change has only worsened the risk of major fires in areas that have become denser. We can't put our heads in the sand and ignore the risk that fires pose in our West Valley community, and expanding Fire District 1 provides a practical and achievable set of standards to help new construction withstand the fires we inevitably will face in the future.

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