



Transcript
Firewise Communities Chat Session
March 21, 2007

Judith_Leraas_Cook Welcome to today's chat session. The purpose of the hour is for us to share information about Firewise planning. My name is Judith Leraas Cook, project manager for Firewise Communities/USA and today's moderator, along with Michele Steinberg, support manager for Firewise. Michele will introduce our guest speaker.

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith. We're going to hear today from Jim Schwab, Senior Research Associate with the American Planning Association (APA) and co-editor of a monthly publication, *Zoning Practice*. Jim was the primary author and principal investigator for a PAS or Planning Advisory Service Report, *Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery and Redevelopment* which APA produced in 1998 under a cooperative agreement with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. More recently, he co-authored *Planning for Wildfires* and was the project editor for the newest PAS Report *Landslide Hazards and Planning*. He helped develop a FEMA-supported project in which APA has developed training for planners on the planning provisions of the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 and led the Firewise Communities Post-Workshop Assessment, to determine the impact of Firewise workshops on community behavior. Please hold your questions until the end of Jim's responses to my questions. When he has finished, the chat will become completely interactive. We encourage you to join in at that time. Jim, as the co-author for APA's *Planning for Wildfire* report, what were some of the key items you discovered about this topic in your research and interviews?

Jim_Schwab We actually summarized these key items in a final chapter of the report, "Big Issues in Planning for Wildfires." After reading plans and ordinances, interviewing a number of people deeply involved in this subject, and surveying the literature, we then tried to identify the most recurrent themes. One was that wildfire mitigation planning often takes place outside the comprehensive planning process, in stand-alone plans produced by fire departments, emergency managers, and others. Too often the planners were not involved or less involved. We argued that such planning ought to take place within the comprehensive planning framework. Many of the best solutions demand changes in zoning, planned unit development, and subdivision regulations. Those depend on land-use planning. We also found that communities tended to be more effective when they engaged in long-term programs of public education and outreach. That way,

mitigation efforts that rely on public involvement, like debris clearance days and vegetation management on private property, don't become one-shot efforts. That leads to another point, which is that ultimately there is no escape from some level of individual responsibility on the part of property owners and homeowners. Our society has become too reliant on the rescue efforts of public safety officials and not enough on common sense prevention measures.

Michele_Steinberg Are there any places in the U.S. that do a particularly good job at planning for wildfires? Are there any models that you would point us to?

Jim_Schwab One that we particularly liked was the city of Santa Barbara, California. They have learned some hard lessons over the years with some pretty dangerous fires in pretty rugged territory. They have developed a composite hazard assessment rating system that combines values for slope, aspect, and fuels, and they used it to identify the most hazardous parts of the city. In the "Extreme Foothill Zone," on the city's northern edge, the city tightened its standards by broadening the defensible space requirements from 100 feet to 150 feet, 300 feet on extreme slopes, while reducing them in less vulnerable areas. This is a good use of spatial mapping technologies to overlay all these values and identify the real problem areas. Okeechobee County, Florida, employed a consulting firm, Continental Shelf Associates, to develop its wildfire mitigation plan. It includes a wildland fire risk analysis and an institutional analysis. The latter identifies the capabilities of various agencies and how they can work together to contribute to solving the problem. But reinforcing my earlier point, this plan noted that wildfires were not addressed in the county comprehensive plan. Ashland, Oregon, and Flagstaff/Coconino County, Arizona, had also stepped forward to produce Community Wildfire Protection Plans that were interesting.

Michele_Steinberg In your work with other natural hazards issues and with FEMA's approach to all-hazard mitigation, do you see ways that communities can link their wildfire planning to other kinds of plans and projects?

Jim_Schwab Yes. First, it always makes sense to pursue an all-hazards approach and to complete the hazard mitigation plan required under the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 to qualify for hazard mitigation grants from FEMA. With appropriate mapping technologies, this approach allows you to overlay your various identified hazards and see where you may be dealing with multiple or interactive hazards in your community. You can then devise special strategies that do not conflict with each other. For instance, fires often occur on wooded hillsides. Such a hillside may be more subject to flooding and landslides if the hills are denuded of vegetation in a severe wildfire. Second, it's important not to duplicate work. Planners and emergency managers need to be consulting with each other about mutual strategies. Effective land-use regulations, for instance, would incorporate wildfire mitigation into subdivision design, which can emerge from effectively addressing those issues in a land-use element of a comprehensive plan.

richr Wouldn't you say that it is also important to look at the impact of infrastructure and changes needed to reduce hazards?

Jim_Schwab You can prepare these elements with an eye to using the mitigation element as your DMA plan as well.

Michele_Steinberg Hi richr, We are going to open the chat for questions shortly.

Jim_Schwab The ideal way to prepare the elements of a comprehensive plan is by establishing internal linkages that cross-reference the things that need to get done. For

instance, a transportation element can deal with hazard provisions about multiple routes of egress from subdivisions. Maybe your housing element can address emergency shelter; be imaginative about making the connections.

Michele_Steinberg Jim, I'd like to make our audience aware of your work on the review of state land-use planning laws. This project looks at whether states include natural hazards components in their statutory planning authorities. Can you tell us more about this project?

Jim_Schwab Yes, go to <http://www.ibhs.org> to see it, and click on "Land-Use Planning." Several years ago, the Institute for Business and Home Safety contracted with APA to maintain and update a web-based report that lists all the general planning authorities and requirements of state planning legislation as well. We found that only about 10 states actually require communities to include a natural hazards element in their comprehensive plan. These are largely in the Southeast or on the West Coast. A few others suggest it; most never deal with it. On the other hand, 15 now offer technical assistance from state agencies to help communities in preparing hazards elements. Of course, many others are involved in preparing the DMA hazard mitigation plans, but this study focuses on state planning laws.

Michele_Steinberg In previous chats, we have had discussions about the difficulty of getting developers to incorporate Firewise concepts into new development in some areas of the country. Can planning address this issue?

Jim_Schwab Absolutely. The best way to mitigate any hazard has always been on the front end, not after development has occurred. For instance, site plan review can incorporate mitigation standards under development regulations that empower planners to insist on such measures in the design phase. These measures can include requirements for defensible space, street patterns that facilitate multiple access, and water supplies that assist firefighters. These zoning, planned unit development, and subdivision codes are really where the mitigation rubber hits the road.

Michele_Steinberg Most of our audience is aware of a relatively new requirement under the federal Healthy Forests Act for local governments to develop a Community Wildfire Protection Plan or CWPP. Do you have any comment on this approach to planning? Is it easily integrated with other local planning activities?

Jim_Schwab CWPPs can be an effective way of focusing on the wildfire problem specifically, but they still should not be done in isolation from other planning efforts. It's important to use the CWPP to highlight the needs for implementation of strategies that must be incorporated into everyday planning activities. We are working with FEMA on a pending project we plan to undertake on the integration of hazard mitigation into all forms of local plan making. These would include not only comprehensive plans, but area plans (such as for corridors or neighborhoods) and functional plans (sewer system, transit), and capital improvements programs. Why capital improvements programs? As Willie Sutton said in explaining why he robbed banks, "Because that's where the money is." Mitigation often costs money, and planning needs to plug mitigation into money sources to make it effective.

Michele_Steinberg Thank you, Jim. I'd like to open the chat to everyone in the audience to ask questions of Jim about the topic. Jim, you mentioned some highlights of the upcoming American Planning Association conference in Philadelphia before we started the main chat. Would you care to repeat those?

Jim_Schwab Sure. One is a session, sponsored by Zoning Practice, addressing tree preservation ordinances. This is, of course, different from wildfire mitigation, but still of interest to all those planners interested in forestry and foresters interested in planning. Second is a session about a current APA project for the Forest Service, with partners in ISA and American Forests, to prepare a report on planning for urban and community forestry. You can learn about the project at <http://www.planning.org/forestry>.

Michele_Steinberg Just a note: The chat format will accept about 250 characters in an entry. If you are typing a long question or response, you might want to break it into two entries.

jandersen What about identifying grant opportunities in CWPPs that directly relate to mitigation measures suggested in the document? How effective is this (provided communities apply for and receive grant funds) versus linking the mitigation measures to CIPs?

Richard_Deppen I am sorry everybody I must go have a meeting up state. I am looking forward to getting back and reviewing the transcript.

Jim_Schwab By the way, I also should mention that on Saturday, April 14, we run a full-day workshop with FEMA, "Planning for a Disaster-Resistant Community." I would say do it all. After all, your CIP can include grant moneys drawn in from outside sources once those are secured for the community, or it can identify potential sources for the future.

Priscilla I also apologize for having to leave for a meeting in town. I am glad we have transcripts available.

Jim_Schwab One thing planners should be in these situations is opportunistic. Some of the most effective planners I know are very good at identifying funding sources to get things done.

jandersen Often planners can plan and identify funds, but the follow through needs to be on the communities end, and many communities lack the knowledge or experience in pursuing outside funding, can you recommend ways to improve this function at the community level?

Jim_Schwab One problem, which you have identified to some extent, is that many communities with wildfire problems are small towns and not bigger cities with planning resources. Regional planning agencies can sometimes fill the expertise gap, and so can consultants, although they cost money, but they can provide know-how that a one-person planning agency may not have. Universities may also provide some expertise. Some provide planning assistance through extension services. The outreach needs to be creative.

Jan_Fulkerson In many areas it may not even be a small community but rather a subdivision or neighborhood. This is the level work must be done at least on the retrofits.

Jim_Schwab I understand your point. At that level, I think you are talking about providing training outreach to volunteers and homeowners association leaders, which did occur to some extent in Firewise training. I would hope that state agencies, like state forestry and planning offices, could combine forces here, though I admit we have a long way to go. And I bet Judith can weigh in about at this point with some notes about Firewise Communities USA.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thank you, Jim. That is a great idea for an upcoming chat session. Michele - I think you will agree! We would like to thank you, too, for the

wonderful discussion today and hope you will be able to join us again on April 11. Our guest, Priscilla Stanley, will tell us about the Firewise successes at Tierra Linda, near Kerrville, Texas.

Jim_Schwab Thank you for the opportunity to chat with all of you.

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Jim. I think this was an excellent discussion and highlighted some of the issues that wildfire-prone communities face.

Judith_Leraas_Cook As most of you know, we will post today's chat proceedings in the 'Chat Transcripts' area of the web site.

David_Jaramillo Thank you all, this has been very helpful to me and I look forward to the next session.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Glad you were here, David.

jandersen Thanks Jim. Good discussion, I will definitely pass along the transcripts.

Jim_Schwab I'm glad it was helpful. Good luck to all of you.

Michele_Steinberg Thanks again. I'll call you to follow up, Jim.