



Legislation Text

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To: Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Permit Sonoma Fire Prevention

Staff Name and Phone Number: James Williams 707-565-1154

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:

Updates on the Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign, and Sonoma County Chipper Program

Recommended Action:

- A) Receive an update on the Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign.
- B) Receive an update on the Curbside Chipper Program, and consider staff recommendation to transfer \$75,000 from the remaining balance in the already allocated Reinvestment and Revitalization Funds (former Redevelopment) to the Chipper Program to increase pace and scale.
- C) Receive an update notifying the board that a contract has been drafted and will be executed with Fire Safe Sonoma Inc. in the amount of \$75,000 to implement additional community outreach and education identified as a priority as part of the Resiliency and Recovery Framework.
- D) Direct Transportation and Public Works to coordinate with County Counsel to develop no fee process for property owners wishing to remove vegetation from the public Right of Way.

Executive Summary:

This item provides updates on projects underway through the Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign (Campaign) approved by the Board on April 2, 2019. The Board approved \$500,000 for FY 2018-19, and \$900,000 for each year from FY 2019-20 through FY 22/23, or a total of \$4.1 million, to support efforts to reduce risks to life, property and the environment from wildfire. This local investment in wildfire planning, education and mitigation is intended to identify and achieve needed outcomes, and demonstrate commitment useful for competitive funding proposals and leveraging external funds.

Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign reports include:

- Budget report
- Updates on FY 2019-20 and FY 2020-21 Vegetation Management Inspection Program
- Update on grants awarded or submitted for wildfire mitigation

Additionally, this item includes:

- Updates on the Residential Chipper Program, and requests additional funding.

Discussion:

Sonoma County and its population continues to face risks from wildfire. Factors include homes built without fire resistant construction materials and practices, insufficient defensible space, residential land use in wildland areas, and excessive vegetative fuels within and near residential areas, and on roadsides. Countywide, approximately 165,000 residents live within the defined Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) area.

Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign:

Increasing wildfire probability continues to pose major risks to residents, the local economy, and ecosystems. It is critical to use best management practices and available science to address risks, especially in consideration of this year's low rainfall. County staff continue to work towards the goals of the Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign to plan for and create human communities and wildlands that are better adapted to a wildfire-prone environment.

Extensive efforts are underway by numerous County agencies and public and private partners to make progress towards this broad goal by promoting and incentivizing home hardening, prioritizing areas where the most effective large fuels treatment projects might take place, enhancing alert and warning, promoting community-scale preparedness and evacuation planning, and landscape resiliency. Progress on many of these efforts have been presented to the Board since April 2, 2019 as Recovery and Resiliency Framework updates. This update on each element of the Campaign includes a description of the major activities, how budgeted funds have been expended to date, and what is planned through the end of 2020.

In FY 2019-20, the Board allocated \$900,000 for the Expanded Fuels and Landscape Resiliency Campaign to be used in seven program elements. Additionally, funds encumbered and carried over from the 2018/19 allocation of the Reinvestment and Revitalization Fund to the FY 2019-20 budget were used to accomplish Campaign elements as follows.

1. Small Parcel Inspection and Fuels Management

\$375,000 is allocated for this element to support the Vegetation Management Inspection Program. Other Vegetation Inspection program costs are allocated in different Campaign elements, see below and Attachment 1. The bulk of expenditures is for contracts with local fire districts to perform vegetation management inspections, Fire Prevention staff inspections in areas under County jurisdiction, and general program coordination, including data management, outreach, printing and mailings.

As we continue implementing the Vegetation Management Campaign, it's important to note the expenses associated with inspections and fuels reduction are typically incurred between the months of May through October of the calendar year. This means that most of total costs budgeted will generally be incurred during the first and fourth quarters of the County fiscal year. During the calendar year 2019 for example, higher costs were incurred during the fourth quarter of FY 2018-19 for activity during the months of May and June 2019. Higher costs were incurred again during the first quarter of following fiscal year, FY 2019-20 covering the months of July 1st through October, of 2020. Appropriations are adequate for FY 2019-20. We have entered into multiple agreements, and we are moving forward with implementation. However, expenditures have not yet been posted against FY 2019-20 appropriation because the seasonal nature of inspections will begin again in June.

Expenditures to date for the calendar year 2019 inspection program activity is funded by \$500,000 Reinvestment and Revitalization Funds allocated by the Board in FY 2018-19. To date, program expenditures are \$417,848. Contract encumbrances to fire districts were \$285,000. County of Sonoma staff cost was \$48,025. Other expenditures include: abatement \$13,927; outreach and education, \$19,665, and program administration, \$51,231. Expenditures for FY 2019-20 and FY 2020-21 will come from the Fuels Reduction Campaign already funded appropriations and are expected to be used for calendar year 2020 to conduct 4,400 inspections. Appropriations for FY 2019-20 (\$516,000) are expected to be fully spent on all program elements for 4,400 scheduled inspections in calendar year 2020. Approximately 70% of the 2,430 first inspections will be conducted by the fire districts, with the remaining 30% conducted by Permit Sonoma Fire Prevention staff. Fire Prevention Division inspections will be in CSA#40 areas (Sotoyome and Fitch Mountain), and areas under contract (Schell Vista and Graton). Past experience indicates that approximately 50% of first inspections are non-compliant. The budget includes funding for 1,970 re-inspections on non-compliant parcels, and complaint-based inspections (4,400 total inspections).

Program Detail: Vegetation Management Inspection Program (VMIP) FY 19/20 and FY 20/21 (Attachment 2)

April-October 2019, Contract Inspection Program

Permit Sonoma Fire Prevention, in conjunction with 13 local fire districts performed inspections throughout the County's unincorporated areas. Together, these agencies inspected 2,244 improved properties and 749 unimproved properties. Based on data from completed inspections, the overall compliance rate for improved properties was 50% and for unimproved properties, 53%. After re-inspection of properties that had violations, 72% of improved parcels, and 91% of unimproved parcels were found to be compliant.

In most of the inspection areas, this program was new to property owners, thus the primary focus for inspectors was on resident education and voluntary compliance. However, five abatements were conducted on Fitch Mountain on properties previously inspected and noticed. Fire Prevention staff project that in 2020, the second year of collaborative district inspections, enforcement and abatement will increase, based on the established budget. Using public forums, media, and community meetings, every effort will be made to inform the public that non-compliance may result in abatement.

For the 2020 inspection season, Fire Prevention staff anticipates completing 4,400 defensible space inspections. However, total number inspected will be dependent upon partnering agencies' overall workload and capacity. The Fire Prevention Division will implement the following actions, in accordance with the standard enforcement timeline (Attachment 3). Based on conversations with fire district partners, Fire Prevention staff do not anticipate significant impacts to the inspection program due to COVID-19. However, issues such as receptivity of the public to having inspectors on their property, and availability of healthy staff, could have impacts.

Preparation for the FY 2020 Vegetation Management Inspection Program (VMIP) is well underway. Activities completed and in progress include launching improvements to the Collector App data collection platform used for field inspections and data management, and researching and drafting modifications to Chapter 13A. Inspections will be performed by Permit Sonoma (Graton, Schell Vista, Fitch Mountain and Sotoyome) and Fire Protection Districts including Cloverdale, Forestville, Geyserville, Gold Ridge, Kenwood, Rancho Adobe, Sonoma County Fire District, and Sonoma Valley Fire & Rescue Authority. Fire Prevention staff have completed provisional mapping and selection of Local Responsibility Area (LRA) parcels zoned for less than 5 acres to be

included in the VMIP (Attachment 4). The Fire Prevention Division is working in collaboration with the University of California Cooperative Extension and the Sonoma Ecology Center to update inspector training materials and the annual notice. This collaboration focuses on ensuring that inspectors and the public are presented with information that clearly explains how the requirements of Chapter 13A can be met while following best management practices for the environment.

For Complaint-based inspections, residents will now be able to enter complaints on So Co Report It. Complaints will be forwarded to the appropriate fire district for inspection. The So Co Report It platform will allow for more efficient data analysis and tracking of complaint follow-up.

Virtual inspector trainings are scheduled for the week of June 12-16. Annual notice for property owners will be mailed June 11. The notice includes information about upcoming inspections and inspection criteria, and upcoming educational opportunities. Virtual community outreach meetings will take place June 17, 18, 20, 25 and 27.

In addition to the Notice, announcements of upcoming inspections and community meetings, Press Releases and Public Service Announcements (PSAs) will be delivered in English and Spanish through local radio and press in addition to ads in the Press Democrat. Media interviews will be scheduled as possible in outlets such as KSRO. Social Media will include Next Door notification and Facebook & Twitter posts. A social media toolkit will be provided to participating Fire Districts to share the information to contacts within their jurisdictions. This schedule is provisional, depending on unfolding circumstances.

Five Virtual Community Outreach Meetings will be held in collaboration with the local fire departments. Meeting content and platforms will be determined in consultation with the Fire Districts, to best address community needs. Fire Prevention will notify the Board and CAO as meetings roll out. While the primary focus of the meetings will be on what residents need to know for inspections, they will also provide an excellent means for the public to speak directly to fire prevention personnel about their wildfire concerns, and learn about best management practices.

1. Once inspections begin, inspection data will be tracked using the GIS-based Collector App platform. Properties that fail the first inspection will be re-inspected approximately 30 days after the first inspection. Abatement is a last resort, and will only be considered if a property is determined to represent a significant risk to neighboring properties. Abatement procedures can be commenced following the failed re-inspection and notification, and procedures as described in Sonoma County Code Chapter 13A or Sonoma County Code Chapter 1, depending on adoption of ordinance amendments. Fire prevention staff will issue notices, process hearing requests, and conduct hearings, as necessary following procedures of Chapter 1. Abatements can be performed in late summer or early fall, weather and fire activity permitting.

2. Abatement Cost Recovery

\$80,000 is allocated for seed money to abate properties that are not compliant with the Vegetation Management Ordinance. Expenditures to date, \$13,927, are from the FY 2018-19 Reinvestment and Revitalization fund allocation (\$500,000). Because Calendar Year 2019 inspections were new to most of the inspection areas, the districts preferred to focus on voluntary compliance. Several factors make it difficult to project future expenditures. The economic impacts of COVID 19 on many county residents is an important consideration, yet wildfire knows no boundaries. While economic difficulties will be a

consideration, overgrown and non-compliant properties which pose risk to the community may be abated. Proposed changes to Chapter 13A removing the zoned for five acres or less limitation creates the potential for more abatement, especially for failed inspections based on complaints from the public.

3. Large Parcels and Projects Implementation

\$100,000 is allocated to support development and implementation of large-scale fuels reduction projects. Because of the complexity of implementing large-parcel fuels treatment projects, especially permitting and environmental review, it is imperative that projects are of high value for both community resiliency and restoration of native habitat. The fine-scale data necessary for prioritization of areas for treatment has only recently become available, thanks to work of a variety of County Agencies such as Ag + Open Space and private partners such as Pepperwood Preserve, who have used LiDAR data to create fine scale fuel models for the County.

A growing collaborative effort launched by Permit Sonoma and Regional Parks staff is now using this data to apply fuel models to begin development of a proposal for CAL FIRE's Climate Investments Forest Health grant program. Additionally, the update of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan, underway through a FEMA Hazard Mitigation grant, will be instrumental in identifying areas for critical projects.

Fuel modeling data has been available only recently, so budgeted funding remains unspent and available for this campaign. Once sufficient modeling data is available, we will begin project selection, and work with partners such as the Resource Conservation Districts, CAL FIRE, and other partners to begin the processes necessary to plan for large projects. We do not yet have expenditures in this category. The funds became available in July, 2019 during the height of power shutdown emergencies, followed by the Kincade Fire. Absent staff dedicated to stewarding large parcel projects, we are only in early phases of implementation. However, large parcel projects are a high priority, thus these funds will be encumbered and spending will begin as soon as possible. One possibility is to consider extra help staff to plan, coordinate, and implement projects. We anticipate full expenditures in the future.

4. Permitting and Compliance Support

\$150,000 is allocated to support the environmental compliance components necessary for development of large parcel fuels treatments. Because the County is in early stages of planning large parcel project implementation, staff have not yet had need of permitting and compliance support. As we move forward to develop models, and with the increased collaboration that will come from the Community Wildfire Protection Planning process, we anticipate that these funds will be fully utilized.

5. Community Education and Engagement

As previously directed by your Board, \$85,000 has been allocated to support non-profit partners such as Fire Safe Sonoma, Inc., other fire safe councils and/or COPE groups for wildfire outreach and education, development of local Fire Safe Councils, Community Wildfire Protection Plan development, and activities which will expand capacity to serve the County as a whole. The bulk of the allotment, not to exceed \$75,000 will be expended through contract with Fire Safe Sonoma, Inc. A contract is near completion, and funds will be granted to Fire Safe Sonoma when finalized. The remaining \$10,000 will be used for

education and outreach for other program elements.

6. Appropriated funding for County-Owned Parcel Treatment

\$20,000 is allocated to conduct fuels reduction treatments by existing County staff and/or contracted service providers on County-owned properties. In FY 2019-20, \$20,000 will be used to protect County-owned critical infrastructure, such as communications towers, by removing hazardous vegetation near structures and on access roads to structures. This work will take place in late June 2020, or whenever annual grasses have cured. Consideration of funding for critical infrastructure will be considered as part of the development of the Hazard Mitigation and Community Wildfire Protection Plans, and will help prioritize annual treatments through FY 2022-23.

7. Program Management/Administration

\$90,000 is allocated for the management and administration staff time and direct expenses required to lead, execute, and report out on the program. \$51,231 from FY 2018-19 allocations has been spent to date (Fire Marshal, Senior Fire Inspector, and one extra help Fire Inspector). These staff perform duties for the program in addition to regular responsibilities. In addition, other staff time is leveraged for the program. Staff anticipate approximately half of appropriated funds in FY 2019-20 will be used, with the remainder of encumbered funds carrying forward to FY 2020-21.

Moving forward, staff will continue to use existing staff for program management. In the future, budget permitting, staff recommends hiring an extra help Fire Inspector I who can coordinate the program during inspection season, April through November.

Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign

Extensive efforts are underway by numerous County agencies and public and private partners to make progress towards this broad goal by promoting and incentivizing home hardening, prioritizing areas where the most effective large fuels treatment projects might take place, enhancing alert and warning, promoting community-scale preparedness and evacuation planning, and landscape resiliency (Attachment 5).

Grant Funding and Proposals

Permit Sonoma submitted grants to CalOES/FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program in September of 2018 to support the County's efforts to plan for and to create more resilient homes and communities. Five proposals were submitted, four have been awarded wholly or in part, and one is still under review. The total value of submitted grants is \$14 Million (Attachment 6).

Additional grants and other financing will be necessary to maintain fire-adapted communities and resilient landscapes over the long-term. The allocation authorized continues to provide in-kind cost share necessary to demonstrate local commitment and leverage additional funding from foundations, state and/or federal programs.

Permit Sonoma Grants Awarded: FEMA/CAL OES Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)

1. Wildfire Adapted Sonoma County: Education and Incentives for Safe and Resilient Communities

Permit Sonoma Fire Prevention Division submitted a proposal to the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program in September 2018 (\$6.7 million). Targeting 14 high-risk areas throughout the county (Attachment 7), this innovative program will provide educational defensible space inspections and structure hardening assessments, accompanied by financial incentives to help residents offset the cost of reducing vegetation and/or addressing structural vulnerabilities. FEMA has authorized Permit Sonoma to begin Phase I of this two-phase project. Phase I includes program setup, outreach, defensible space and structural hardening inspections. Phase II will include completion of cultural and environmental compliance requirements and implementation of structural retrofit and fuels reduction.

2. Planning Grants

A. Sonoma County Community Wildfire Protection Plan Update & LHMP Annexation, \$200,000.

Provides critical updates to the 2016 Sonoma County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The CWPP is a comprehensive wildfire planning tool which collaboratively identifies wildfire risk and prioritizes projects that can reduce risk. The updated plan will include enhanced mapping, wildfire modeling, and revisions subsequent to the 2017 wildfires. The updated CWPP will become the wildfire chapter of the Sonoma County Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan (see below). Both projects are being managed by the Permit Sonoma Planning Division, in close partnership with the Fire Prevention and Hazmat Division and the Department of Emergency Management.

B. Sonoma County Multi-Jurisdiction Hazard Mitigation Plan Update, \$333,000. This project updates and expands the Sonoma County Local Hazard Mitigation Plan to a Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan (MJHMP), to include incorporated cities and towns for coordinated risk assessment and mitigation actions (Attachment 8). The updated MJHMP will include new or enhanced sections which consider emerging issues, such as human health hazards.

Applications Submitted, still under review

1. **Sonoma County Fuels Reduction Project, \$6.8 million.** This project aims to reduce the County's wildfire risk by removing hazardous fuels on road systems and private parcels. The project will use four key selection activities to identify areas for fuels reductions activities: 1. Burn history of fires exceeding 5,000 acres 2. Excessive ladder fuel loads 3. High population density 4. Road network capacity limitations (Attachment 9). The project is focused on three primary hazardous fuels reduction techniques to reduce the wildfire risk in Sonoma County: targeted grazing, removal of hazard trees near structures or roadways; and other community-level vegetation management strategies that reduce the threat to life. All hazardous fuels activities will take place within two miles from structures. The project will remove hazardous fuels on up to 3,000 acres.
2. In December 2018 Permit Sonoma Fire Prevention, in partnership with Pepperwood Preserve and Fire Safe Sonoma, submitted a grant to create a science-based decision support tool using Geographical Information System (GIS) data to accurately assess vegetation communities and create a "Fine-Scale Decision Support Data Toolkit" to help fire agency staff and the public accelerate the scale and pace of hazardous fuels reduction. Though the grant was not awarded, Pepperwood Preserve obtained a different funding source and completed the project. They have made the application available to the County to use

in the update of the CWPP, and for the prioritization of large parcel treatments.

Residential Chipping Program

The County initiated a free Residential Chipping Program with grant funds beginning in 2014. In 2015, the Board of Supervisors authorized \$170,000 to fund the program for one year. The Chipping Program plays an important role in reducing fire behavior near homes and offers a safe and effective alternative to burning to dispose of vegetative materials. The Chipper Program is a cost-efficient means of supporting the goals of the Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign. The popularity of this program is clearly evident. This year, we opened the program for applications on April 22, 2020. By May 14, we had received more than 300 requests for chipping.

Program benefits:

1. Free chipping eliminates disposal costs and incentivizes residents to take positive action to remove flammable vegetation.
2. The program primarily targets the 100-foot defensible space radius around home, and access roads, thereby reducing fuels in the areas that pose highest risk to life and property.

The Board continues to fund this popular program, which, depending on approved level of funding, typically operates from May 1 through November or December. In 2018 and 2019, the number of applications received before the program's May 1st start date overwhelmed the program's capacity to serve all requests. Program funding is intended to support the cost of 1.5 FTEs, fuel costs and machinery maintenance. This year, residents will submit chipper service requests through SoCo Report It, the County's reporting and tracking tool for non-emergency issues in the unincorporated areas of the County. While use of the tool should greatly increase administrative efficiency and enhance customer service, approved funding to support the program's goals challenge staff's ability to recruit and maintain personnel, maintain and service equipment, and efficiently run the program.

Since the chipper program's inception in 2014, chipper service request applications have increased by 274% (Attachment 10). Following the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires, public awareness of wildfire risks is heightened. Wildfires that threatens homes, whether in the Geysers or in Australia, galvanize residents to proactively reduce risks to their homes and communities. To support community groups such as COPEs and Fire Safe Councils that work to make neighborhoods more resilient, greater capacity to provide free chipping that can help them accomplish their goals is needed. Additional funding would increase efficiency and better serve the public.

The optimal time for residents to reduce vegetation is between the months of November and March. During these months, trees are dormant making it a better time to prune. Wildlife is less active and higher fuel moisture reduces risk of accidental fire ignitions. Encouraging property owners to remove heavier fuels during cooler and wetter months makes it easier for them to mow seasonal grasses in late spring and early summer months prior to potential extreme fire weather.

For Calendar Year 2020, Chipper Program staff plan to implement the following process improvements:

1. Use SoCo Report It for application intake and tracking.
2. Establish a chipper schedule for specific zones. Plan outreach and implement an interactive map so the public will know when the chipper and crew will be in their area.

In order to increase Residential Chipping Program capacity, staff recommends shifting \$75,000 from the available balance in the Expanded Fuels Reduction and Landscape Resiliency Campaign program to the Chipping Program in the current fiscal year (Attachment 10). Shifting funds would allow for a contractor to assist program staff during periods of high demand, help reduce service backlogs, and support community fuels reduction projects. No new appropriations are requested at this time. Moving forward, staff has initiated discussion with a variety of funders and cooperators to increase partnerships and leverage external funding to build the program.

Sonoma County Transportation and Public Works (TPW)-Roadside Clearance:

Residents are increasingly concerned about fuels build up on roadsides abutting their parcels that may hamper ingress and egress. Many property owners are willing, at their own cost, to partner in collaborative projects to reduce roadside fuels. However, obtaining encroachment permits to do the work can make it difficult to implement these projects. By developing expedited encroachment permitting and no cost permit processes for roadside clearing, we can help residents reduce risks.

TPW recommends requiring a notification only (email or phone call with a response acknowledging/approving the closure) with at least 72-hour prior notice for mechanical or manual vegetation management work that does not involve lane or road closures.

For work involving lane or road closures an expedient permit should be issued to afford the County an opportunity to review closure procedures. The 72-hour prior notice would afford the opportunity to notify fire and emergency personnel, other essential services, and the public.

The fee waiver can be implemented with a Board resolution authorizing the County's Public Works Director (Road Commissioner) to waive the fee when it pertains to this type of project benefitting the County. To move this process forward, staff is recommending that the Board direct TPW and Permit Sonoma Engineering Division to coordinate with County Counsel to develop policies and procedures. If authorized, this policy and fee waiver resolution would come back to the Board for consideration and approval.

Prior Board Actions:

Vegetation Management Inspection Program - March 29, 2016, July 11, 2017, October 23, 2018, April 2, 2019 and October 1, 2019/Chipper Program - August 19, 2014 and October 1, 2019

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 19-20 Adopted	FY20-21 Projected	FY 21-22 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	75,000		
Additional Appropriation Requested			

Total Expenditures	75,000		
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance	75,000		
Contingencies			
Total Sources	75,000		

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The FY 2019-20 Vegetation Management Inspection and Chipper Program efforts have been completed within the previously authorized budget. There is no additional impact for FY 2019-20. For FY 2020-21 and subsequent fiscal years, appropriations will be requested through the budget development process or a separate board item. In order to increase Residential Chipping Program capacity, staff recommend transferring \$75,000 from the remaining balance in the Reinvestment and Revitalization Funds, Fund 11155 Account 57012 (former Redevelopment) to the Chipping Program, Fund 10005 Account 47102 in the current fiscal year (Attachment 10). This item will process moving \$75,000 for vegetation management via the County Administrator and Auditor-Controller-Tax Collector's delegated authority adopted on March 24, 2020, concurrent resolution #20-0096 to review, approve, and execute FY 2019-20 Budget revisions through the end of the COVID-19 declared emergency or through 06/30/2020, whichever occurs first.

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

N/A

Attachments:

1. Expanded Fuel Budget
2. VMIP FY19 20
3. Seasonality
4. 2020 Insp Area Map
5. Department Reports
6. Grants
7. Grant Map Wildfire Adapted Sonoma County Project Areas
8. Multi Jurisdiction Hazard Mitigation Plan Map
9. Fuels Reduction Grant Map
10. Chipper Program
11. Contract Fire Safe Sonoma

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

N/A