



December 5, 2022

House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery
Sent via email to: hwrec.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov

RE: For the record of the December 9th meeting of the Committee

Dear Chairman Evans,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a reflection of our wildfire recovery process to the House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery. We are proud of the work that has been done in our community in the past 27 months since the Almeda Fire started on the north side of Ashland and spread along the Bear Creek corridor burning through Talent, Phoenix and densely populated portions of unincorporated Jackson County. By the time the fire was stopped, it had burned more than 2,500 structures, displaced thousands of people and upended the lives of many hundreds more. The City of Phoenix has made measurable progress along our road to recovery, and it is undoubtedly true that recovery in Phoenix could not have been as effective without the efforts and support of the State of Oregon, coordinated in large part through this committee. As described in further detail below, significant progress has been made, but there is still much work left to be done, and the City of Phoenix hopes that continued support will be made available to help complete the work that is underway.

The following is a brief overview of some of the major efforts Phoenix has undertaken in the past 27 months along with some information regarding the State's role in supporting these efforts. Although there are many more efforts, both large and small, that have been involved in our wildfire recovery, the projects mentioned in this letter are illustrative of how the State's support has been vital in Phoenix's recovery.

The City's efforts in recovery fall generally into the following categories:

- Assist fire survivors in returning to Phoenix.
- Plan for future growth and development to include more opportunities for housing.
- Prepare for future natural disasters and mitigate against future loss.

From the very early stages of fire recovery, the City of Phoenix has focused on identifying opportunities to streamline processes for rebuilding. These efforts included the creation of a demolition permit program to aid property owners wishing to clear their properties prior to the FEMA/ODOT effort; code amendments to remove unnecessary regulatory barriers and allow for easier replacement of lost structures; transitioning to the State's online ePermitting system for building permits; and adding staff to assist in the planning and building permit process. These efforts alone would have overwhelmed the City's resources without the help provided by the State through the Municipal Wildfire Assistance Program (MWAP) and monies allocated to the City through HB5006 to fund additional Building and Planning staff. The City has added staff positions and utilized consultant resources to help with recovery efforts using the funds received. With the added capacity, Phoenix is on track to replace roughly two-thirds of its lost residential units within the first 2 ½ years



following the fire, including over 90% of detached single-family homes and multi-family units lost. Detailed permit information through the end of November 2022 is available on the City's website at <https://www.phoenixoregon.gov/community/page/wildfire-recovery-permit-statistics> .

While Phoenix was heavily impacted, the area most effected by the Almeda Fire was the unincorporated portion of Jackson County just north of Phoenix. This area, identified as an urban reserve for Phoenix (PH-3) through the Greater Bear Creek Regional Problem Solving process, is highly urbanized and served by a water service district. Concerns related to the viability of the water district and the ability to continue to provide water to the residents of this area lead Phoenix to pursue help from the State in identifying a long-term solution to ensure continuation of water service. Along with these efforts, the City has successfully added PH-3 to its urban growth boundary (UGB), providing new opportunity for the City to more directly engage in the planning and recovery efforts in PH-3 but also significantly increase Phoenix's area of concern regarding wildfire recovery.

The City of Phoenix was in the middle of a multi-year effort to expand its UGB to provide land for both residential and employment development prior to the Almeda Fire. The lack of developable land in Phoenix, particularly for residential development, became painfully clear in the aftermath of the Almeda Fire. The region as a whole was experiencing extraordinarily low vacancy rates for housing, and with the loss of more than 2,000 housing units across the burn area, the housing deficit in the region hit crisis levels after the fire. Phoenix has had very little opportunity to add much-needed housing after the fire due to a lack of developable lands within the UGB. The City of Phoenix continued to prioritize UGB expansion while dealing with the other tasks related to fire recovery both to help facilitate the redevelopment of PH-3 but also to provide land for additional residential development. These efforts have taken an enormous amount of staff time and could not have been completed without the support from the State through MWAP and HB 5006. Without this work, recovery would not have been used to improve the long-term resiliency and vitality of the areas most impacted by the fire.

Phoenix has been without a working fire station for more than two years due to the loss of a portion of the fire station in the Almeda Fire, but the damage to City infrastructure and emergency response capabilities could have been much worse. The fire station was located immediately adjacent to Phoenix's city hall and police station buildings, and the loss of these structures would have greatly impacted the City's ability to provide for public safety and fire recovery. The City of Phoenix has partnered with Jackson County Fire District No. 5 to replace the lost fire station in a new joint fire, police and city hall building. The building, known as the Phoenix Government and Public Safety Center, will also house a new emergency operations center that can be used as a command center when responding to future disasters. The building design allows for maximum efficiency in the use of the existing property and reduces costs of construction by combining these facilities into a single building. The building provides significant improvements in energy efficiency, resiliency, flexibility, expandability, and adaptability compared to the facilities it replaces and can serve as an example of successful partnerships and efficient colocation of services. This project has been funded primarily through funds allocated by the State and would not have been possible without that support. More information can be found on the project website at <https://hmkco.org/cityofphoenix/> .



There are many exciting things on the horizon in Phoenix. Many displaced residents have been able to rebuild and come home. We have seen interest from businesses looking to come to Phoenix to be part of what they see as an opportunity to leverage the work that has been done over the past two years to rebuild and grow our community into the future. Due, in no small part, to the help received from the State, Phoenix is firmly on the path to recovery. The amount of work accomplished in a city of fewer than 4,500 people in the past months has been nothing short of extraordinary. However, there is still much work to be done, and we need continued support to see this process through to a successful conclusion. The funds provided to Phoenix for increased Building and Planning staff capacity will expire at the end of the current biennium (June 30, 2023), but we know that the need for additional capacity will continue beyond that date. Without the ability to keep our existing staffing levels, much of the good work that has been started will not be completed. In addition, the increased cost of construction, in both material and labor costs, has created a shortfall in funding for the Phoenix Government and Public Safety Center. The project broke ground earlier this fall and is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2023. This rapid timeframe for completion provides very little time to seek alternative funding sources.

In September of 2022 the City hosted its first annual “Phoenix Rising” event to commemorate the two-year anniversary of the Almeda Fire and to share information with the community regarding emergency preparedness and the status of the rebuild. The event included a free barbeque for all and a free shave ice for anyone who was signed up for the local emergency alert system (with opportunity to sign up at the event). We were pleasantly surprised not only by the turn-out to the event, but also that so many of the people who came out stayed for hours visiting with their neighbors, people they met at the event, State, County and City representatives in attendance and the staff from Phoenix-Talent School District, Jackson County Emergency Management, Jackson County Fire District No. 5, and City Public Works, Police, Administration and Community and Economic Development departments that were there. It was a wonderful opportunity to come together as a community to celebrate the resilience of our people.

On behalf of the community of Phoenix, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the work the members of the House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery have done to support our wildfire recovery. I would also like to recognize and thank our local Representative Pam Marsh and Senator Jeff Golden for their advocacy in support of Phoenix. Knowing that there is still much to be done, we ask that you keep the House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery in place through the next biennium. Together we have started many great things and through continued cooperation, I am confident we will be celebrating the completion of these transformational projects in Phoenix in the years to come.

Sincerely,


Eric Swanson, City Manager