

# Planning for Wildfires Training Summary

**TAPA Spring Retreat I March 21-22, 2019**

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## Overview

The 2019 Tennessee American Planning Association (TAPA) spring retreat was held in Pigeon Forge, TN, and was organized in partnership with the City of Pigeon Forge, TN Division of Forestry, and FEMA. This year's retreat brought a special focus to planning the wildland-urban interface (WUI)—any developed area where conditions affecting the combustibility of both natural and cultivated vegetation (wildland fuels) and structures or infrastructure (built fuels) allow for the ignition and spread of fire through the combined fuels. Attendees were from across the state and included land-use planners with diverse specializations, forestry and land managers, and fire fighters.

## WUI Session Objectives

As of 2010, more than one-third of all homes in Tennessee have been built in the WUI. Fires such as the Black Bear Cub Fire (2013) and Sevier County Fires (2016) underscore the need to plan for wildfire in a comprehensive and resilient manner by finding land-use solutions.

Morning sessions presented core concepts to help planners identify the WUI and understand risk factors that may increase the potential for wildfire disasters in communities. Learning about key factors that influence fire behavior—fuel, weather, and topography—helps planners learn how they can help break the WUI disaster cycle through better land-use planning decisions such as site selection, construction methods, and landscaping.

Afternoon sessions built on these concepts and provided planning solutions and community examples to highlight best practices and strategies, including limiting development on slopes, ensuring multiple points of access, and increasing setbacks. Policy solutions focused on Comprehensive Plans, Hazard Mitigation Plans, and Community Wildfire Protection Plans; regulatory solutions highlighted the different code options (land use, building, fire, and WUI codes).

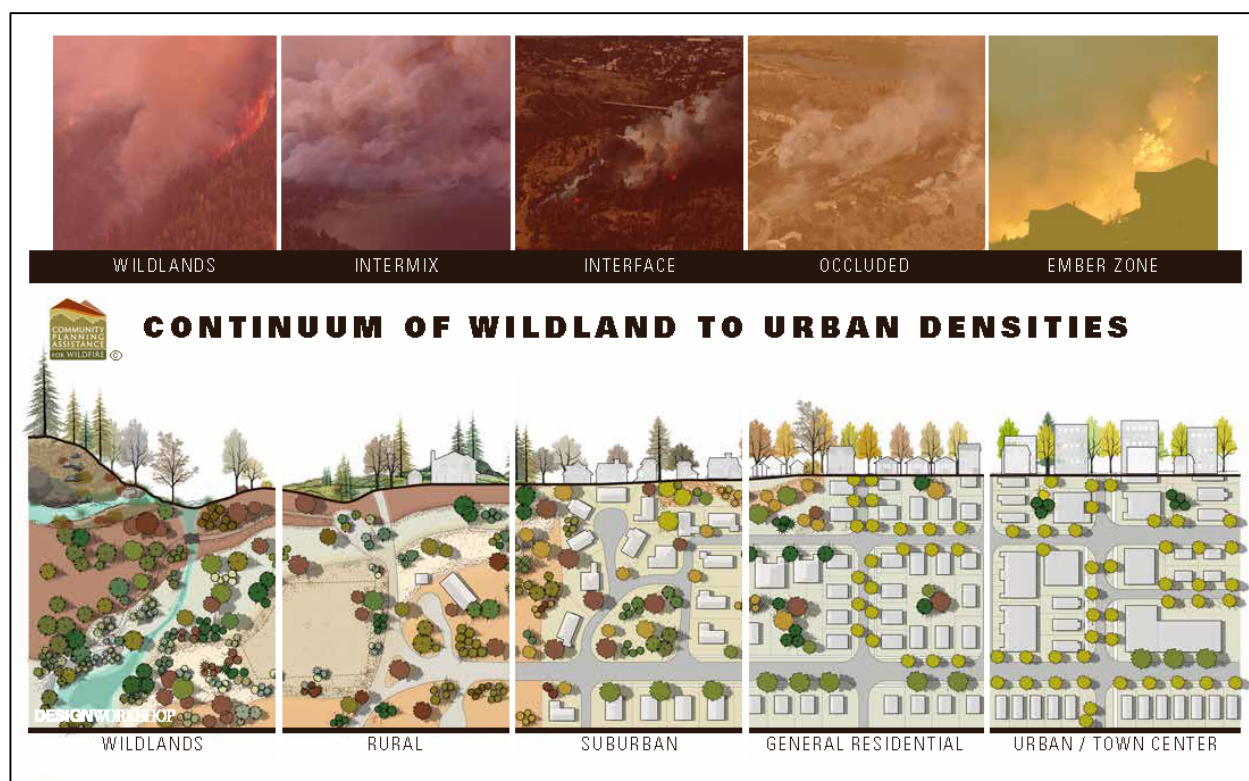


*Nearly 100 attendees participated in the WUI educational sessions. Several dozen planners also signed up for a WUI mobile tour.*

Attendees also participated in an interactive small group exercise to cross-pollinate perspectives in fire and planning. This exercise asked each group to identify short and long-term opportunities for local application.

An optional mobile tour on Friday showcased concepts discussed during the previous day. The mobile tour included the following stops:

- Ripken baseball facilities, which provided an overview of areas affected by Sevier County 2016 fires;
- Areas affected by the Black Bear Cub Fire, including discussions on rebuilt structures;
- Voluntary Firewise efforts in a local neighborhood to highlight positive mitigation examples.



*This continuum image was presented to help planners understand the “transect” concept as it applies to the WUI. The image connects different urban densities with ways that wildfire ignition can affect each area.*

## Key Outcomes

As part of the training, participants identified challenges and opportunities that can influence the integration of wildfire mitigation into local land-use planning efforts.

## Challenges

- Staffing capacity limits the ability to support planning and regulatory implementation;
- A transient tourist population creates challenges for public outreach and “ownership” of mitigation solutions;
- Many areas have significant water supply limitations;

- Communities often have only one way in and out that is too narrow and steep to accommodate suppression access and evacuation routes;
- Many areas of Tennessee are experiencing exponential growth, accelerating the wildland-urban interface challenges;
- Small lot sizes with challenging topography are the norm for many properties;
- Illegal burning of trash continues unabated due to lack of capacity;
- Many communities are lower income with older homes that may be more susceptible to wildfire.

#### *Opportunities*

- There are many strong collaborative relationships between state and local agencies to leverage;
- Planning commission workshops can be held to inform and engage elected officials and the public;
- The involvement of volunteer fire departments is essential as most of the fire departments in Tennessee are volunteer;
- Future electrical utility upgrade projects can be leveraged to include mitigation of these utilities.

#### *Additional Feedback*

Throughout the spring retreat, participants shared positive feedback with presenters on the value, usefulness, and quality of the material presented. Specific feedback included:

- “Exceptional!”
- “One of the better conferences we’ve ever had.”
- “I learned a lot more than I was expecting.”
- “It was really interesting for me as a planner, even if I don’t work directly in this kind of environment.”
- “Having people from the fire department here was really helpful. We should do this more often!”

#### **Media Coverage**

Local media covered the event, featuring interviews from Pigeon Forge Fire Chief Tony Watson and WUI presenters.

#### **Pigeon Forge Fire Dept. hosts wildfire safety conference (10 NEWS)**

[www.wbir.com/article/news/pigeon-forge-fire-dept-hosts-wildfire-safety-conference/51-0b4cb0f4-9171-4bba-9019-859e5436447c](http://www.wbir.com/article/news/pigeon-forge-fire-dept-hosts-wildfire-safety-conference/51-0b4cb0f4-9171-4bba-9019-859e5436447c)

#### **East Tennessee firefighters, city leaders learn steps to prevent wildfires (WATE NEWS)**

[www.wate.com/news/local-news/east-tennessee-firefighters-city-leaders-learn-steps-to-prevent-wildfires/1866957518](http://www.wate.com/news/local-news/east-tennessee-firefighters-city-leaders-learn-steps-to-prevent-wildfires/1866957518)