

Louisville bans flammable juniper plantings



Juniper bushes line the perimeter of a shopping area in Louisville. The Louisville City Council approved an emergency ordinance banning new junipers from being planted in the city. CLIFF GRASSMICK — DAILY CAMERA

BY JULIA KING

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An emergency ordinance the Louisville City Council voted 5-2 to approve last week bans new juniper plantings across the city and tightens requirements for fire-resistant building materials.

The ordinance, which went into effect immediately upon adoption on Jan. 20, prohibits new plantings of all juniper species anywhere in Louisville. Existing junipers may be maintained but may not be replanted or replaced with another juniper species.

Junipers contain volatile resins and oils that ignite easily and burn hotter than many other types of vegetation, a city staff memo states. The plants also tend to have low branches that can act as “ladder fuels,” allowing fire to climb from the ground into tree canopies and toward nearby structures.

Beyond vegetation, the ordinance also strengthens standards for building materials in fire-prone areas. Certain building materials covered under the city's Fire Hardening Code will have to meet the highest fire-resistance rating available. That rating must be verified through standardized fire-testing methods such as ASTM E84 — a standard used to measure the surface burning characteristics of building materials, including their "Flame Spread Index" and "Smoke Developed Index" — or the builder must otherwise prove that the materials meet or exceed those same safety benchmarks.

The council directed staff to draft the emergency ordinance at its Dec. 16 meeting. It's the first emergency ordinance the council has considered since 2023, according to city spokesperson Grace Johnson. Since 2020, Johnson said, there have been 14 emergency ordinances approved by the council, including Tuesday's — five of which were related to the 2021 Marshall fire.

Councilmembers Josh Cooperman and Caleb Dickinson voted against the ordinance, questioning whether it met the threshold for an emergency.

Dickinson said he believes the juniper ban could have moved forward "at a normal cadence" and with more consideration from city staff and the council.

"I don't have a problem banning junipers from being planted," Dickinson said. "I'm not super excited that we have an emergency ordinance in front of us. ... Using the emergency ordinance for banning juniper bushes from being planted on new properties is going to maybe have an effect on maybe a handful of properties, maybe in a few months, because it's January."

"We've had quite a number of red flag days in the last month. ... So it's not a theoretical concern. It's something that exists," Mayor Chris Leh said.

Councilmember Judi Kern, who lost her home in the 2021 Marshall fire, defended the ordinance and said the city has waited too long to act.

"We as a council have been exceptionally remiss in taking care of our community that nearly burned to the ground," Kern said. "This is long overdue."

Kern called the juniper ban "a very good start" and suggested additional vegetation restrictions could be considered as the city continues discussions around its wildland-urban interface (WUI) area, a designated part of the city where homes and other structures are located close to undeveloped land such as forests, grasslands or open space — making those areas more vulnerable to wildfires.

The Louisville measure mirrors actions taken by the Boulder City Council, which has adopted similar wildfire-mitigation rules, including prohibiting new juniper plantings in the city's WUI areas. Boulder officials on Jan. 8 voted in favor of another ordinance that in part, would require junipers to be removed from lots as part of permit applications for new buildings or structures.

Boulder Development Code Amendment Manager Karl Guiler said the city is also finalizing an updated tree and plant list that would take effect March 7 and would prohibit juniper planting citywide.

In Boulder, Guiler said, enforcement is tied directly to the permitting process.

Those requirements apply to all types of development, including single-family homes, Guiler said