

San Diego just fast-tracked new fire-safety rules for homes. Here's what homeowners should know.

Thousands of homeowners will soon have to comply with controversial 'Zone Zero' regulations that ban flammable material like plants within 5 feet of a home.

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New fire prevention rules in San Diego will force thousands of city homeowners to begin complying with controversial “Zone Zero” regulations that prohibit flammable items like landscaping within 5 feet of a home.

The new rules and policies — which the City Council fast-tracked through approval last week with no public debate — also seek to boost firefighting by requiring a water supply at construction sites and by strengthening rules against dead-end streets in new developments.

But the Zone Zero rules — once scheduled to take effect statewide in 2023, before a series of delays prompted by public outcry — are expected to be the most impactful of the city’s fire policy changes.

They apply only in very high fire-hazard severity zones, but the vast majority of San Diego — about two-thirds — is in such a zone.

While Zone Zero rules are expected to dramatically boost wildfire prevention, some critics — and even some supporters — say they will be expensive for homeowners.

They’re also expected to force homeowners across San Diego and other parts of California to battle over the contractors, landscapers and other vendors needed to make changes required by the new regulations.

Zone Zero rules go beyond rules for Zone 1, which refers to the area within a 5 to 35 foot radius of a home, and those for Zone 2, the area between 35 and 100 feet, to address the 5 feet of space directly next to a home.

The rules essentially say that nothing flammable can be in that zone. While plants and landscaping are the chief focus, the law also applies to fencing, patios and decks made of wood or other flammable materials.

Planning Commissioner Daniel Reeves said last week that Zone Zero is likely to be particularly impactful in San Diego because the city has so many homes that back up to canyons.

“There are thousands of homeowners on canyons that are probably not compliant even with the Zone 1 and 2 requirements, let alone Zone Zero — so it will be interesting how enforcement is done there,” Reeves said.

City officials said they plan to focus on education over enforcement, conceding they don’t have the resources or the investigators needed for aggressive enforcement.

“There are so many parcels that we just don’t have enough staff to really enforce,” said Daniel Hypes, the city’s assistant fire marshal. “When we get complaints, we will go and investigate.”

The Fire-Rescue Department does educational home-risk assessments on request, and Hypes said those assessments are expected to become more crucial with the Zone Zero rules in effect.

Even without enforcement, most homeowners will likely have to comply with the rules or risk losing fire insurance, said Deputy Fire Chief Tony Tosca.

“If we don’t do it, then the insurance is going to impose it anyway,” said Tosca, suggesting that the Zone Zero rules will help prevent wildfires like those that ravaged the Los Angeles area last winter. “These are hopefully going to improve things so we don’t have a Pacific Palisades.”

Tosca also said city officials plan to be flexible in some situations — for instance, allowing a 100-year-old tree growing within 5 feet of a home.

“We’re not going to expect them to cut it down,” he said. “We’ll give them options. We’re going to do a lot of education and outreach.”

Firefighters respond to the Ariane fire in Clairemont on Tuesday, June 24, 2025, in San Diego. (Michael Ho / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Some community groups, including the Scripps Ranch Civic Association, are aggressively trying to spread the word about Zone Zero to homeowners.

Bob Ilko, a group leader, said he’s given a nearly two-hour presentation to thousands of people at a series of recent forums. He’s scheduled to give another in Rancho Bernardo at 2 p.m. on Jan. 17.

“When you take a step back, you see that this is going to have a massive impact,” Ilko said Friday. “We’re all going to fight over suppliers, vendors, landscapers and installers.”

He said the most impacted neighborhoods will likely be Scripps Ranch, where 98% of properties are in the high fire-risk zone, and Rancho Peñasquitos, where 95% are.

But he stressed that nearly every neighborhood in the city has at least one small finger of land that is in a high-risk zone.

Zone Zero will take effect in the city in February, but it only applies to new construction at first. Most existing homes that don’t already conform with the regulations will have until February of 2027 to comply, Hypes said.

State law allows cities and counties to give existing homes as long as three years to comply — but San Diego officials are choosing not to wait that long.

But Ilko noted that the law applies immediately to existing homes that are being rented out. He said the delay in enforcement only applies when the property owner lives in the home.

He said some critics have exaggerated the cost of compliance, which he said can typically range from about \$2,000 to \$20,000 per home. Ilko said he brought his own home in Scripps Ranch into Zone Zero compliance for \$7,700.

Ilko said Zone Zero rules fall short of home-hardening, which requires special windows, new screens for vents, enclosing attics, replacement of wood siding and other more ambitious efforts. Hardening a home can cost \$100,000 or more, he said.

To Ilko, Zone Zero is smart legislation.

“The whole idea is that fire embers attack the home within 5 feet of the structure,” he said. “The idea is we want there to be nothing to burn when an ember lands within 5 feet. The most important thing in brush management is those 5 feet.”

Firefighters battle a brushfire off Gilman Drive near UCSD on Thursday Jan. 23, 2025.
(Sandy Huffaker / For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Zone Zero is expected to take effect across the state next year after Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order in February saying the rules must take effect by the end of 2025.

The state Board of Forestry is still finalizing the rules. Hypes said San Diego’s fire code update includes the latest version of the regulations available.

He said other local governments have already been enforcing Zone Zero but didn’t provide details.

The city's new rules also require developers to provide adequate water flow at the construction sites of mid-rise and high-rise buildings, following two recent construction fires in La Jolla and Loma Portal.

"We've had some significant construction-site fires, which are very difficult because all of the building safety features like sprinklers are not operational," said Hypes, adding the change is particularly important for wood-frame projects.

He stressed that the new policy is more about timing than about adding any new rules.

"It's not requiring anything additional beyond what the project requires. It's really just making sure it gets established at the correct point in the project," he said.

Planning Commissioner Ted Miyahara questioned the stricter approach. "We know that incurring costs sooner rather than later impacts projects," he said.

But Tosca said it's important. "We want the cart before the horse," he said.

Kelly Charles, the city's chief building official, said city rules require water supply as soon as combustible materials are on site. But there are sometimes violations, she said.

"It isn't common in infill development, because there's water supply already there — but it's these newer sites, newer developments," she said.

Grading of land and establishing an underground water supply usually go hand-in-hand, but Charles said sometimes right-of-way permits get delayed.

"We've had all sorts of projects where they've had to bring in a water tank while they were waiting on their connection," she said.

The city's new rules also limit dead-end streets in new developments. They will now be limited to a maximum of 800 feet where parcels are zoned for less than 1 acre — which is most of San Diego.

Because fire officials wanted to get the new city rules approved before the end of the year, they took a highly unusual path through the city's approval pipeline.

They were approved by the council's Public Safety Committee Dec. 12 and then four days later by the full council last Tuesday — both times with no debate or discussion.

They were then discussed by the Planning Commission last Thursday during a workshop where the commission did not vote on the new rules.