

# Venice Stakeholders Send Letter Asking City To Address Encampment Fire Risk

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Citing the federal judge who ordered the city and county of Los Angeles to provide all indigent persons on Skid Row with shelter in the next six months, the Venice Stakeholders Association said Friday its lawyer sent Los Angeles officials a letter urging them to address the increased fire risk during the homelessness crisis.

U.S. District Judge David O. Carter's April 20 order says, "Fires are breaking out with distressing frequency, threatening both housed and unhoused populations. In 2020, fires related to homelessness increased by 82% compared to 2019. That figure is on pace to rise in 2021."

The claim was part of an order for the city and county to provide shelter for all of Skid Row's unhoused residents following a lawsuit filed last year by the L.A. Alliance for Human Rights, a group of downtown business owners and homeless residents, which sued the city and county to try and force a resolution to the increasing numbers of people living on the streets.

The Venice Stakeholders Association's attorney Jeff Lewis asked the city to "reconsider" its appeal and instead work with the L.A. Alliance for Human Rights.

Some Venice residents raised concerns about fires related to homelessness after a house fire in the 100 block of East Club House Avenue destroyed the residence and killed a dog on April 22.

Councilman Mike Bonin, who represents Venice on the Los Angeles City Council, said on the day of the fire, "LAFD says no evidence that a Venice fire that destroyed a home and killed a dog was started by someone who is homeless. Media is spreading rumor fire started by homeless person upset (with a) homeowner. Fire under investigation, no evidence yet who started it."

The Los Angeles Fire Department issued a statement

Friday again saying that "there is no evidence that indicates the involvement of a person experiencing homelessness."

Lewis added in his letter to city officials, "to the extent that the city attorney is advising the city that it may rely on statutory and common law immunities to continue to ignore this fire risk, I urge you to seek an updated legal opinion — in closed session — regarding the city's potential liability in light of Judge Carter's findings that the city is creating a fire risk that did not previously exist."

The association added that 10 owners of 22 Venice properties are calling on the city to adopt a buffer zone between encampments and structures to avoid fires.

David Graham-Caso, Bonin's deputy chief of staff, said "the surest way to prevent fires at homeless encampments is to help people move off the streets, out of encampments, and into housing or shelter — something the Venice Stakeholders has repeatedly fought through litigation, social media campaigns and media stunts."

"This week, while VSA continues its campaign to stop city efforts to convert the former Ramada motel on Washington Boulevard to homeless housing, Councilmember Bonin will be opening another homeless housing project at a former motel near LAX, funding shared housing for unhoused residents of Venice, continuing to push for opening tiny home villages, safe parking and safe camping, and interim housing throughout his district, and pushing for funds in the city budget for dedicated housing resources and mental health and drug abuse services for Venice," Graham-Caso said.

Bonin and the Los Angeles Fire Department will also begin a pilot project Monday with an LAFD "fast response vehicle" unit dedicated specifically to fire risks in the Ocean Front Walk area.