



## STAFF REPORT

**TO:** Board of Commissioners  
**FROM:** Suzy Watkins, Harbor Director  
**DATE:** September 27, 2022  
**SUBJECT:** **Discontinued Seasonal Fire Ring Program**

### **Recommendations / Proposed Motion**

- Receive and file staff report and provide direction on the discontinued seasonal fire ring program. Staff recommends that the District not reinstate seasonal fire rings.
- Proposed Motion: Approve staff recommendations.

### **Policy Implications**

Port San Luis Code of Ordinance Section 18.070 (A). No person shall light, use or maintain a fire within the District except at, Olde Port Beach, and only in a fireplace or containment ring provided by the District, unless otherwise authorized by the District.

### **Fiscal Implications / Budget Status**

If the seasonal fire ring program was reinstated, the District would incur additional costs related to staff time as well as additional exposure to liability from debris on the beach.

### **Alternatives Considered**

The following actions were considered but are not recommended at this time:

- Reinstate the seasonal fire ring program.

### **Discussion**

The District previously had a seasonal fire ring program on Olde Port Beach. Fire rings were in place from mid-March through early November each year. The rings were removed each winter as tidal conditions made the beach inaccessible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the fire rings were removed year-round. As pandemic conditions eased, staff evaluated the fire ring program with consideration to public safety, financial impacts, and preservation of District assets.

The seasonal fire ring program was discontinued due to the following reasons:

- High fire risk during the program season
- Burn risk to beach users from hot embers buried in sand
- Hazards to beach users from broken glass, nails, and other debris
- Damage to revetment as stones were moved onto the beach to create unauthorized fire pits
- Higher levels of vandalism and trash
- Increased District expense managing the above issues and cleanup from both legal and illegal fire rings

The decision-making process included consultation with Cal Fire regarding the risks related to open fires and the proximity to a dry hillside. Based on the risks, hazards, and associated expenses, the decision was made to discontinue the seasonal fire ring program effective with the 2021 season. That decision has resulted in reduced costs, improved safety, and a reduction in illegal fires.

At the meeting of July 26, 2022, your Board requested a report back from staff on the fire ring program. Two items were specifically raised: 1) State Parks allows fires at their area facilities; and 2) suggestion that a permit program might help limit irresponsible fire behavior.

District staff again consulted with Cal Fire to identify concerns, risks, and whether any circumstances changed since the last conversation on this topic. Cal Fire personnel indicated that there is continued concern about fires during peak fire season, particularly in proximity to a brush-covered hillside. Fire personnel noted that the Avila area has wind daily, which increases the risk of embers being carried from even the most closely monitored fire. Within the last couple of years, spotting from an Avila area fire has been witnessed up to 300 yards away from the active scene. Cal Fire personnel also indicated that they have been called to respond to incidents where beach goers had dumped hot ashes directly on the hillside. Cal Fire staff was unable to comment on decisions made by State Parks, as that is a separate jurisdiction.

District staff also considered whether a permit system would help manage the fire ring program. Although a permit program could be designed and implemented, there does not seem to be a feasible way of monitoring or managing such a program on the beach. Most fires are late at night when staffing is at a minimum. Even if fire pits were used during the day, additional staff would be required to monitor the legal fires, check permits, and discourage illegal fires. This would increase the cost of the fire ring program, in addition to expense of cleanup and increased risk. No consistent method has been identified to ensure that only legal fires are built, and as noted above, even legal fires come with significant hazards.

Based on the increased hazards and costs, staff does not recommend resuming the seasonal fire ring program.