

Fire Safety Committee

Community Meeting Notes & Site Walk-Through

Tuesday, June 24, 2026 · The Way, Buckingham County, Virginia

Convened by	Erik Phillips-Nania, Secretary, AgniWellCare — on behalf of the Fire Safety Committee / Neighborhood Association for Fire Safety (NAFS)
Date & time	Tuesday, June 24, 2026 — gathered ~3:45 p.m., began informally about 15 minutes early
Format	Brief gathering followed by a guided driving tour down three streets — Lotus, the peninsula at Haris', and Unity Place — and back to The Way
Community members	Erik, Galen, Don, Haris, and Mindy
Special guests	Chad Stover — Regional Fire Specialist, Central Region, Virginia Department of Forestry Michael Downey — Assistant Director for Wildfire Mitigation & Prevention, Virginia Department of Forestry (Headquarters)
Next meeting	Wednesday, July 1, 2026, 5:00 p.m. at 76 The Way
Learn more	agniwelcare.org/fire-safety

Executive Summary

On June 24, our Fire Safety Committee welcomed two specialists from the Virginia Department of Forestry — **Chad Stover** and **Michael Downey** — for a conversation and a driving tour of our roads, ponds, and access points. The aim was to understand how our community can become more *fire-wise and fire-adapted*, and what help is available to us. Here is the short version.

- **Grant funding is within reach.** Organized communities can apply for the Firewise Virginia Community Hazard Mitigation Grant — up to \$9,999, on an 80/20 match — for roadside fuel reduction, signage, and water-source improvements. It is a reimbursement program with continuous (non-competitive) sign-up.
- **We need a UEI to apply.** Applications require a free Unique Entity ID through SAM.gov; AgniWellCare's entity status should let us meet this. The grant also requires a wildfire risk assessment within the last five years and progress toward Firewise USA recognition.
- **Our ponds and lake are real assets.** A dry hydrant lets a fire truck draw water from a pond at no cost to us (100% cost share), through a program the local fire department initiates.
- **Everbridge is our alert system.** Getting every household registered is one of the most valuable steps we can take right now. In Virginia, only law enforcement can order a mandatory evacuation; agencies can strongly recommend one — so a rehearsed community plan matters.
- **We are organizing by street.** Captains and co-captains, logical evacuation zones, a rally point on the hill, and door hangers for every neighbor — Yogaville-affiliated or not.

Three things every household can do now

- 1. Sign up for Everbridge emergency alerts** so you receive evacuation and hazard notices by phone.
- 2. Clear leaves and debris** from the first five feet around your home, plus gutters and roof.
- 3. Make sure your house number is clearly visible** from the road, so responders can find you at night.

The full notes below give the detail behind each of these points — including how the grant works, who to contact, and everyday prevention every household can practice.

Hello neighbors. These notes are shared openly so that everyone in our community — whether or not you were able to attend — can follow along, learn what we learned, and take part in the work ahead. Nothing here is a final decision; it is a record of what we discussed and the next steps we identified together. Where this document states facts about state programs or laws, those have been checked against the Virginia Department of Forestry’s published materials.

1. What this meeting was for

Our aim was simple: to invite professional eyes onto our roads and land, and to understand how a community like ours can become more *fire-wise and fire-adapted*. Chad and Michael walked us through the help available from the Department of Forestry, looked at our access roads and water sources, and answered our questions about grants, evacuation, and everyday prevention. As they emphasized, this kind of assessment is open to any organized community — no one is out of the picture.

2. Where we toured

Rather than drive every driveway, we sampled a representative cross-section of our roads. We toured three streets and returned to The Way:

- **Lotus** — the one-way approach toward the temple, where we looked at roadside vegetation and “ladder fuels.”
- **The peninsula: Horsley Ln to Traveler’s Rest Ln** — more homes, more open space, and frontage on the James River.
- **Unity Place** — a notably wide, well-kept road our guests praised as good for emergency apparatus.

Along the way we viewed the spring-fed lake on the ashram property and several ponds — important because they may serve as water sources for firefighting (see Section 5).

3. Key fire-safety concepts we learned

Ladder fuels and how fire moves here

In Virginia, wildfire typically burns along the ground through leaf litter, then climbs into “ladder fuels” — low and mid-level vegetation such as mountain laurel, autumn olive, or isolated cedars — which can carry flame up into the treetops. Crown fires (fire racing through the canopy) are rare here because our oak-and-hardwood forests differ from the resin-rich pine forests out West. Our fires tend to be slope- or wind-driven, and often calm once the wind drops.

Much of the mitigation work the Department supports focuses on removing ladder fuels along roadsides — which both improves access for emergency vehicles and gives firefighters a place to make a stand, using the road as a fire break.

Defensible space around homes

The single biggest danger to a structure is leaf litter and debris collecting against the house, where blowing embers can ignite it. Simple, low-cost habits make a real difference:

- Keep the area immediately around the home — the “zero-to-five-foot” zone — clear of leaves and debris.
- Consider replacing mulch near the foundation with decorative stone, where most embers land.
- Clean gutters and roof valleys (best done in autumn). A rechargeable leaf blower was warmly recommended as the handiest tool for the job.
- Look beyond the 30-foot zone, up to 100 feet: thin and prune where you can, and keep firewood piles out of the defensible space.

The [NFPA Firewise USA](#) program publishes an excellent checklist with diagrams of defensible-space practices; our guests pointed to it repeatedly as a reliable home reference.

4. Grant funding: the Firewise Virginia Community Hazard Mitigation Grant

The Department of Forestry administers the **Firewise Virginia Community Hazard Mitigation Grant Program**, funded by the National Fire Plan. The details below are confirmed against the Department’s [program page](#):

- Communities may request **up to \$9,999**.
- It is an **80/20 match grant**: for a \$1,000 award, the community contributes \$200 — which *may be met with volunteer time (at about \$35/hour)* rather than cash.
- Eligible projects include mechanical fuel reduction, firebreaks, defensible-space fuel treatments, **dry hydrants and water-source improvements**, road/residence signage, and non-promotional safety education materials.
- It is a **reimbursement** program — the community hires and pays a contractor, then is reimbursed — so the Department cannot pay contractors directly.
- Sign-up is **continuous and non-competitive**; awards are made from available funds, and the Department may approve partial funding.
- The community must have had a **wildfire risk assessment within the previous five years** and be working toward Firewise USA recognition.
- Applications are submitted through the [System Access Portal for Forestry Grants](#).

What we need before we can apply

Applications require a **Unique Entity ID (UEI)**, obtained free through [SAM.gov](#). AgniWellCare’s existing entity status should help us meet this. The Department advises getting your UEI now rather than waiting for a grant cycle. Chad offered to help us prepare the simple itemized budget the application asks for. Once a project is awarded, keep documentation of everything — receipts, volunteer logs, and records of donated materials all support reimbursement.

5. Water sources and dry hydrants

Our ponds and the spring-fed lake are genuine assets. A **dry hydrant** — a fixed pipe that lets a fire truck draft water from a pond — can be installed at **100% cost share (no cost to the community)**. Key details:

- The program is **initiated by the local fire department**, which files the application with the Department of Forestry.
- A state contractor performs a full site assessment and installation, and determines the best location.
- Year-round access matters — the site must remain reachable for a water tender even in the wet season.

Contact for the dry-hydrant installation program: **Michael Womack**, Assistant Director, Virginia Department of Forestry (michaelwomack@dof.virginia.gov). As with most things, our local fire department is the right first step.

6. Evacuation, alerts, and community organization

Evacuation zones

A recurring recommendation was to divide the community into **zones**, so that, if needed, only the affected area must move rather than everyone at once. There is no rigid rule for zone size — what matters is that boundaries are logical for our geography and that we account for neighbors who may need assistance. We have already begun organizing street by street with fire captains and co-captains. Chad, with his structural background, offered to help us think through sensible zone boundaries.

A community rally point

We identified a large building on the hill as a strong candidate for an evacuation rally point, and our guests agreed it looked well suited. Having a clear, agreed-upon place for people to gather is an essential piece of any plan.

Alerts: Everbridge

For emergency notifications, the correct system for our area is **Everbridge**. The technology can send alerts to phones within a defined geographic area, and the message content is set by the authorized local official entering it. [Register for Everbridge alerts here](#). Getting as many neighbors registered as possible is one of the most valuable things we can do right now.

-We need to explore if Buckingham County can do this? -Mindy

Note: in Virginia, the fire department and Department of Forestry *cannot mandate* an evacuation — only law enforcement can order a mandatory one; agencies can strongly recommend it. This makes a well-rehearsed community plan all the more useful.

7. Helpful contacts identified

Contact / Resource	Why they matter
Local fire department (Buckingham County)	First step for dry hydrants, evacuation planning, and volunteer firefighting.
Cody Daniels — Buckingham Emergency Manager (cdavis@buckinghamcounty.virginia.gov)	A key contact for Everbridge / reverse-911 setup, evacuation parameters, and emergency coordination; also a part-time firefighter. One of our best next-step contacts.
David Powell — VDOF District Forester	Point of contact for those interested in seasonal / part-time wildland firefighting work.
Michael Womack — VDOF Assistant Director (michaelwomack@dof.virginia.gov)	Contact for the dry-hydrant (water-source) installation program.
NFPA Firewise USA	National program with brochures and a home defensible-space checklist.
Ready, Set, Go! (Intl. Assoc. of Fire Chiefs)	A community wildfire-preparedness framework worth exploring.

A note on the email addresses above: please double-check spelling before sending anything important, as they were taken from notes rather than business cards.

8. Everyday prevention — for every household

Most wildfires are human-caused, so prevention is something every one of us can practice. A few reminders our guests shared:

- Never discard cigarettes outdoors — two small fires in the county in the two weeks before our meeting began this way.
- Tend any fire pit at all times, keep a charged hose or bucket of water nearby, and stir embers until cold before walking away.
- Be especially cautious on windy, low-humidity days; embers can travel surprising distances.
- Know the burn law: under Virginia’s **4 PM Burning Law**, in effect **February 15 through April 30**, open-air burning is prohibited before 4:00 p.m. when within 300 feet of woods or dry grass; burning is allowed from 4:00 p.m. to midnight if attended and properly cleared. Violations are a Class 3 misdemeanor. Counties may set additional ordinances or burn bans.
- Be mindful indoors, too — incense, candles, and open flames near soft furnishings have started fires in our own cabins before.

9. Where we go from here

Coming out of this meeting, our shared next steps are:

1. Register the community for **Everbridge** alerts and encourage every household to sign up.
2. Confirm our **UEI / SAM.gov** registration so we are eligible for the Hazard Mitigation Grant, and confirm a wildfire risk assessment is on file or scheduled.
3. Connect with the **local fire department** and **Cody Daniels** on dry hydrants and evacuation / alert parameters.
4. Continue building our **captain / co-captain** structure street by street, and sketch out logical evacuation **zones**.
5. Finish and distribute our **door hangers**, welcoming every neighbor — Yogaville-affiliated or not — to take part.
6. Keep documenting volunteer hours and donated materials, which count toward future grant work. – **We need to keep record of volunteer time and meetings, and this will count at about \$45/hour after we get the grant. -Mindy**

Join us

Everyone is welcome at our **next meeting: Wednesday, July 1, 2026, at 5:00 p.m., at 76 The Way**. To get involved, sign up, or share a concern about a neighbor who may need evacuation assistance, please reach out through [the NAFS sign-up form](#) or visit [agniwellcare.org/fire-safety](https://www.agniwellcare.org/fire-safety).

With gratitude to Chad Stover and Michael Downey of the Virginia Department of Forestry for their time and generosity, and to every neighbor helping to keep our community safe.

In service,

Erik Phillips-Nania

Secretary, AgniWellCare

for the Fire Safety Committee / Neighborhood Association for Fire Safety (NAFS)

<https://www.agniwellcare.org/fire-safety>