

**ASHLAND CITY COUNCIL  
STUDY SESSION MINUTES  
Monday, April 6, 2026**

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Mayor Graham called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

Council Present: Councilors Bloom, DuQuenne, Hansen, Kaplan, Dahle, and Sherrell.

Staff Present:

Sabrina Cotta	City Manager
Jordan Rooklyn	Deputy City Manager
Chris Chambers	Forestry Officer

**I. Call to Order**

**II. Reports and Presentations**

*a. Status Update on the Madrone Ridge Acquisition Project*

Rooklyn, Chambers, and MiK McKee with Western Rivers Conservancy (attending via Zoom) presented a status update on the Madrone Ridge Acquisition Project.

**Project Overview:** Madrone Ridge is a 1,974-acre property adjacent to Ashland's urban growth boundary, situated approximately three-quarters of a mile below Reeder Reservoir. The property serves as a strategic buffer for wildfire mitigation, watershed and viewshed protection, wildlife habitat conservation, and potential future recreation. Western Rivers Conservancy holds a purchase and sale agreement for \$7,340,000—based on a July 2024 appraisal establishing fair market value—with total project costs estimated at \$7,415,000 to account for a forest management plan, closing costs, and a Phase 1 environmental review. The city has until September 30, 2027 to close.

**Funding Status:** Of the total project cost, \$5,560,000 in federal funding has been secured through the Forest Legacy Program in the FY2026 federal budget. The remaining \$1,855,000 non-federal match (25%) has not yet been secured. A recent application to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) did not rank in the top tier for funding; Western Rivers will apply again in September 2026. Additional funding opportunities include up to \$1,000,000 through the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department local government grant program (opening January 2027) and a potential low-interest loan through the DEQ's Clean Water State Revolving Fund.

**Permitted and Prohibited Uses:** Under the Forest Legacy Program, permitted uses include trail connectivity, educational programming, and daytime recreation. Prohibited uses include overnight camping, significant motorized vehicle use, and residential development. Forest Legacy funds require fee ownership by a unit of government, precluding transfer to a private organization.

**Forest Management:** Chambers reported that approximately 69% of the property (1,354 acres) has already been treated for fuels reduction, largely through prior partnership with Lomakatsi Restoration Project, The Nature Conservancy, and federal and state grants. Ongoing maintenance, primarily prescribed burning, is estimated at \$100,000 per year, which falls within the city's existing wildfire mitigation fund capacity of approximately \$250,000 annually for forestry activities. Chambers noted

that grant funding, training partnerships (including tribal crews through Lomakatsi), and the Rogue Interagency Training Association could further offset those costs.

**Trail Connectivity:** Existing informal trails on approximately 300 acres (roughly 15% of the property) connect back toward the Ashland watershed trail network. All trails would require formal design and approval through the Parks Commission under the city's existing process, with on-the-ground maintenance expected to be performed by user groups such as Ashland Woodland and Trails Association (AWTA) and Rogue Valley Mountain Bike Association (RVMB). Staff noted a small privately-owned gap parcel through which all trail connectivity funnels, which would require either acquisition or a formal easement before recreational use could proceed.

**Wildfire Risk Context:** Chambers emphasized that the property's location—at the end of a dead-end road in the path of the dominant summer wind pattern—makes it uniquely critical for protecting Ashland from wildfire. An OSU report on file identifies this property as one of the most important blocks for wildfire defense. If not acquired, the property could ultimately be subdivided into homesites, creating both additional ignition risk and firefighter exposure, with no regulatory mechanism available to compel fuel hazard reduction by private owners.

**Council Discussion:** Council raised questions regarding the appraisal methodology and whether comparable sales accounted for deed restrictions, the possibility of renegotiating the purchase price if secondary grant funding falls short, the enforceability of grant conditions by future councils, and the feasibility of Jackson County serving as an alternative owner. Staff confirmed the purchase price is locked in the current agreement, that any grant agreement would be reviewed and agreed to by the City Attorney, and that the Forest Legacy Program requires a governmental entity as the fee owner.

Councilors also raised questions about trail management models used by neighboring communities (e.g., Klamath Falls/Spence Mountain, Grants Pass/Dollar Mountain), the need for a formal discussion with the Parks Commission before any decision is made, and the relationship of this project to the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) and existing watershed thinning work.

**Next Steps / Staff Direction:** Graham summarized council direction for the May return presentation as follows: (1) provide a detailed breakdown supporting the \$100,000 annual forest management estimate, showing staff's work and accounting for inflation; (2) assess the impact of Madrone Ridge management on staffing capacity for CWPP implementation and ongoing watershed work; and (3) contextualize the economies of scale achieved by managing this property in conjunction with adjacent city forest lands. The May agenda item will ask council whether to authorize the staff time investment required to proceed to a full master planning process.

*b. Councilor-led Discussion on the Food and Beverage Tax*

DuQuenne and Bloom introduced this item, and Cotta and Rooklyn provided supporting information.

**Background:** The Food and Beverage (F&B) Tax applies to prepared foods and non-alcoholic beverages sold at restaurants, grocery stores, delis, caterers, and coffee shops in Ashland, including takeout and delivery. The tax generates approximately \$3,000,000 annually. Currently, 25% is allocated

to Parks for capital development and rehabilitation, and 75% goes to the Street Fund. The tax is scheduled to sunset on December 31, 2030. DuQuenne noted that the street fund debt has been secured against anticipated F&B revenues through 2030, meaning reallocation prior to that date would require the General Fund to backstop the street debt obligation.

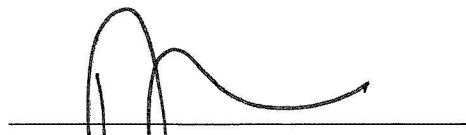
**Proposed Scenarios:** DuQuenne presented two reallocation scenarios for discussion. Scenario 1 would direct 25% to Parks, 10% to streets, 10% to a dedicated infrastructure reserve fund, and 55% to the water treatment plant. Scenario 2 would direct 25% to Parks, 10% to Streets, and 65% to the new water treatment plant. The stated intent of both scenarios is to offset the financial burden on ratepayers from rising rates by using F&B revenue—as it previously offset wastewater treatment plant debt—to fund the new water treatment plant.

**Key Discussion Points:** The council discussed the tension between maintaining street rehabilitation funding and addressing rate pressure on residents. Rooklyn clarified that the street program's pavement management strategy proactively rehabilitates streets before they deteriorate to a pothole stage, which is significantly more cost-effective than reactive repair; reducing that funding risks a reclassification of streets to a more expensive "red" condition. Staff noted that a portion of ODOT-owned roadways (including Siskiyou Boulevard and much of Ashland Street) falls outside city maintenance responsibility. Cotta advised that staff would not recommend using non-enterprise funds to subsidize enterprise fund obligations and noted that the city's existing flat fees (wildfire, public safety, parks) are regressive by nature, suggesting a future study session on the use of a property-tax-based levy as an alternative funding mechanism. Council members broadly agreed that the F&B tax conversation is important given its 2030 sunset and the need to present voters with a clear, well-supported proposal. Concern was expressed about creating new deferred maintenance liabilities while attempting to resolve existing ones.

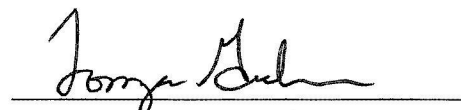
**Outcome:** Council consensus supported bringing this item back in August with analysis from Public Works on the street program's funding needs, a realistic assessment of what reallocation would mean for street maintenance, and a ratepayer impact analysis showing how the various scenarios affect the average Ashland resident.

**III. Adjournment of Study Session.**

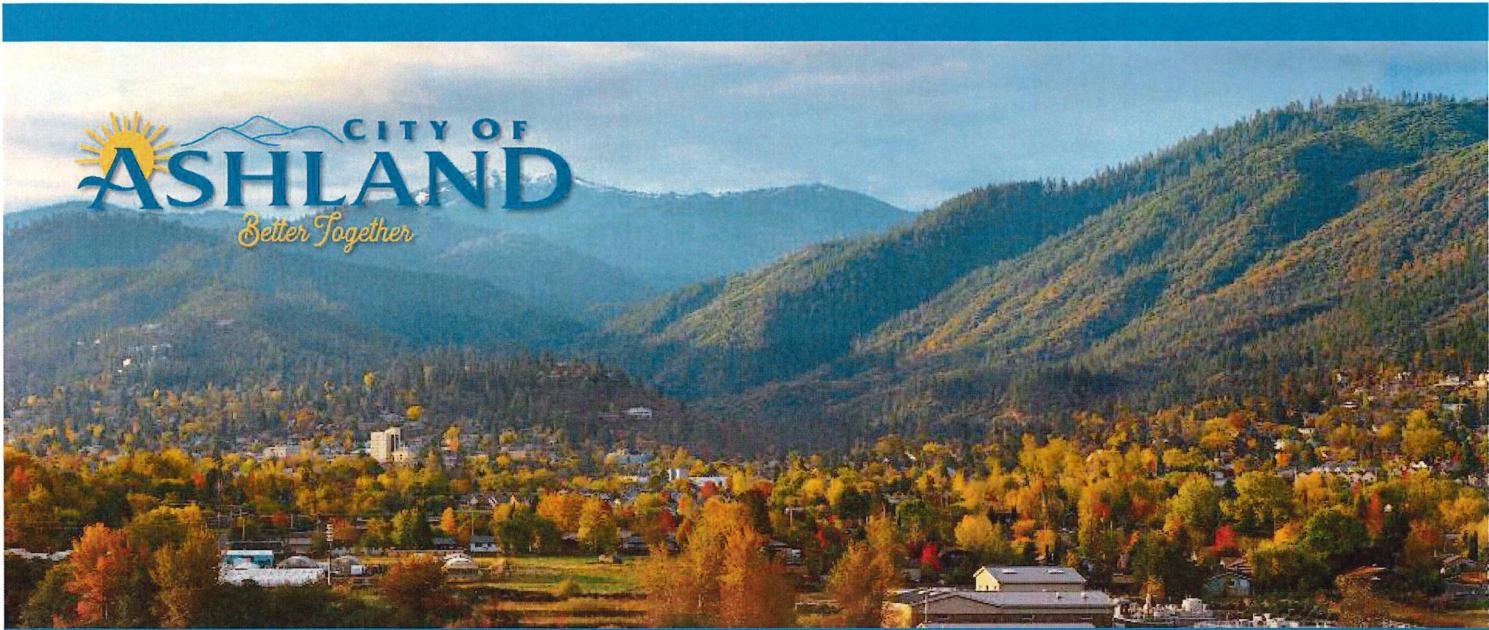
The meeting was adjourned at 7:02 pm.



Deputy City Manager Jordan Rooklyn



Mayor Tonya Graham

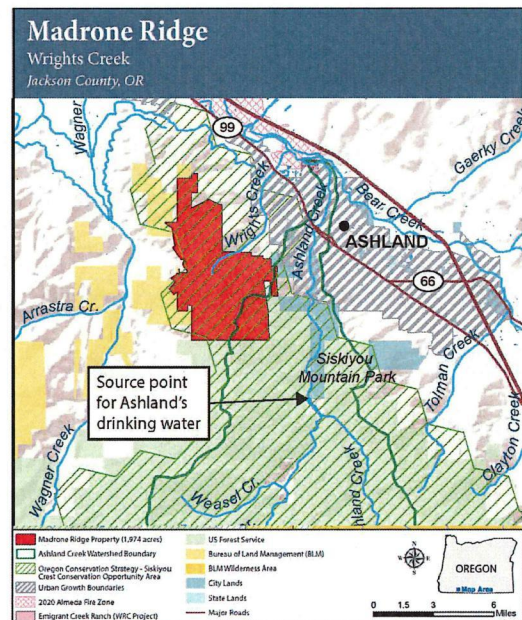


## Status Update on Madrone Ridge Acquisition Project

### *Western Rivers Conservancy*

### Project Summary

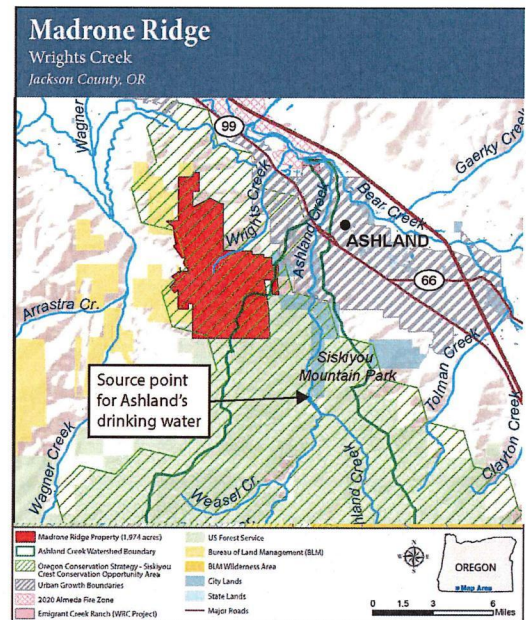
- 1,974 acres Madrone Ridge property, approximately 270 acres within our watershed.
- Property has potential for wildfire mitigation, forest management, conservation, recreation, and keeping Ashland's viewshed intact.
- Western Rivers Conservancy would purchase the property and then transfer it to the City of Ashland as the owner and steward.
- Initial due diligence is complete; have until Sept 30, 2027, to acquire the property.



## Funding Status

Property cost: \$7,415,000

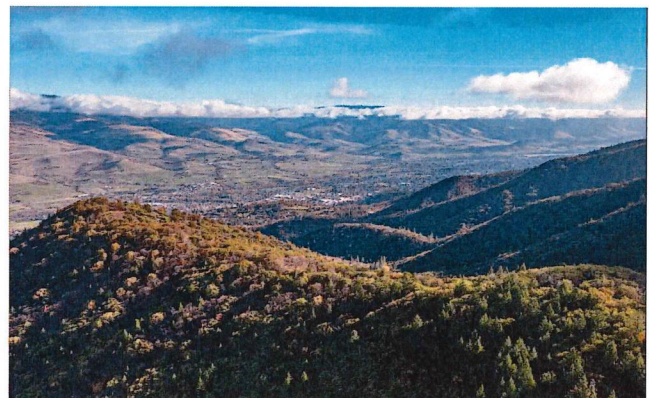
- July 2024 Appraised Value: \$7.34 million
- Secured \$5.56 million in Federal funding
- Still need \$1.885 million in non-Federal match
  - OWEB Grant – September 2026
  - OPRD LGGP Grant – January 2027
  - Clean Water State Revolving Fund Loan



## Recreational Activities

Allowed recreation activities will depend on grant restrictions.

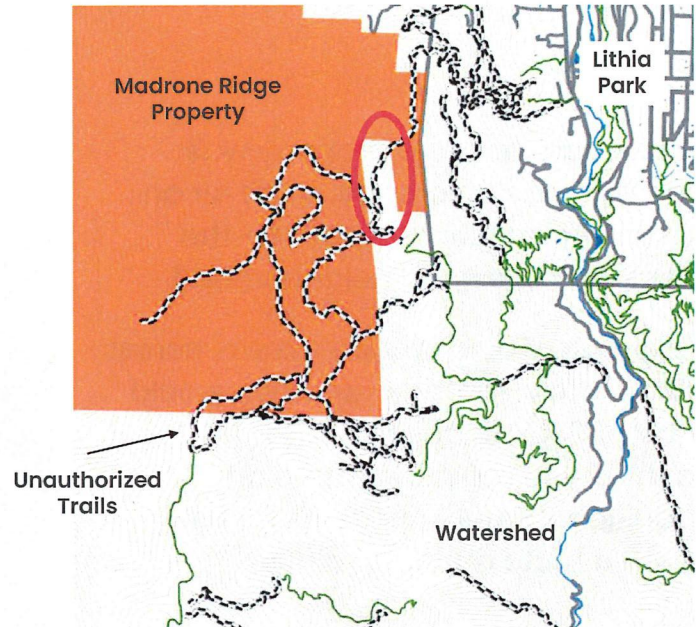
- ✓ Trail connectivity using existing trails
- ✓ Day-time educational use
- ✗ Overnight camping
- ✗ Significant public vehicle access



## Trail Connectivity

Existing unauthorized trails could be upgraded to connect our Watershed trails to BLM land and our downtown.

Trails beyond this area would likely be limited by conservation requirements.

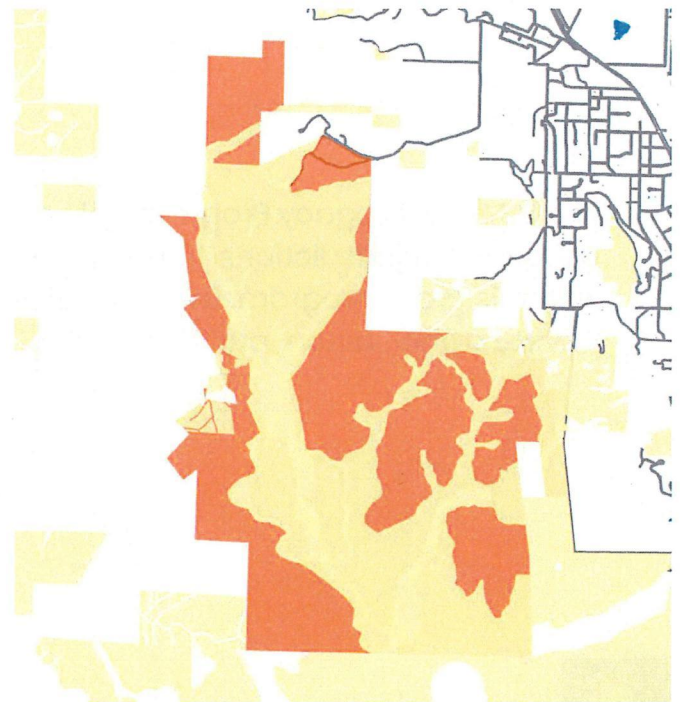


## Forest Management

1,354 acres of fuels reduction on Madrone Ridge has occurred in the past decade through the Ashland Forest Resiliency Project.

We would continue maintenance & management through prescribed burning.

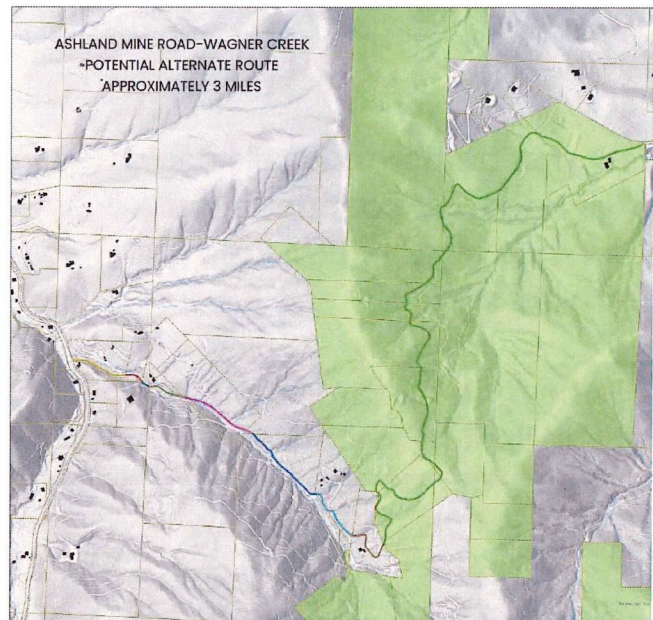
This would cost roughly \$100K per year, which would likely come out of Wildfire Mitigation Fund. Potential partnerships could reduce funding needs.



## Evacuation Access

The Madrone Ridge property was identified as a potential route for an alternate evacuation path for the Ashland Mine Road neighborhood.

The route would require access across 10 privately-owned properties, would cost ~\$256K to build, and \$5-7K annually to maintain. There are additional safety concerns for using such a route during a wildfire.



## Additional Notes

The US Forest Legacy Program only allows property ownership by government jurisdictions. If the City acquires the Madrone Ridge property with this grant program, the City will not be able to transfer ownership to a private owner, a non-profit, or a tribe.



## Next Steps

**May 2026:** Council decision to move forward with Master Planning

**July 2026:** (tentative) Approve grant applications and/or funding approach

**Summer/Fall 2026:** Approval of US Forest Legacy Program Grant Agreement

**February 2027:** Council decision to fund any remaining acquisition costs



QUESTIONS?

