

Staff Report

PUBLIC AND EMPLOYEE SAFETY ON CITY PROPERTIES

May 28, 2019

BACKGROUND:

Following the murder of Celia Barquin Arozamena in June 2018, Representatives from various City departments convened a City Safety Committee to consider steps that could be taken to improve the overall safety of citizens and staff on and around City property. Additionally, a representative from the Ames Community School District observed the initial discussion to identify strategies that could be employed at school district properties.

The committee held several meetings, where members reviewed Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles, discussed City facilities and properties, reviewed a previous study regarding security in City facilities, and toured the Library to further explore design and operating strategies to enhance safety that could be utilized in other City facilities or be incorporated into future facilities. A similar tour of the Water Plant's security features is planned.

These meetings were intended to help City departments hold internal discussions about actions they can take to improve safety, either through changes to their practices or implementing environmental changes that reduce the attractiveness of criminal activity on properties under their control. In many cases, the actions identified in this report were contemplated or in some stage of implementation prior to this incident.

The City Safety Committee identified the following eleven issues to be considered:

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT ON PROPERTIES, TRAILS, AND IN PARKS:

There is an inherent tension between our desire to be "up close" to vegetation and wildlife and some of the safety principles that apply to trails in a suburban environment. Since the City trail system is in use at all times of the day and night, it is increasingly important that trails be designed and maintained to allow open pathways with mowed borders, open visibility from adjacent streets and park areas, easy access for emergency responders, access for maintenance machinery, and all types of users while minimizing maintenance requirements.

City staff cleared brush in and around several City paths, and in some overgrown green spaces. Parks and Recreation staff has reviewed City parks and trails for remote or isolated property and prepared a plan for visiting or evaluating these areas on a regular basis. Areas with a history of unauthorized camping were also identified and scheduled for regular inspections.

CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN SUBURBAN PATHS AND NATURAL AREAS:

Natural areas in the City that are intended to have dense vegetation should be clearly identified and distinct from commuter trails and neighborhood parks. Maintenance of these areas should include identifying and monitoring of invasive vegetation and removal when necessary. This process is already a part of the philosophical approach to Parks and Recreation trail design and maintenance but it should continue as a more formal part of trail planning or redevelopment of existing trails.

LIGHTING:

Paths and trails that are frequently used during periods of darkness should be evaluated for lighting. Some casual trail users can relocate their activities but those who commute to school or work may not have a reasonable and safe alternative. These commuter paths are increasingly important as the community moves toward more trail activities. However, there needs to be a balance between safety and wildlife preservation. Park and trail users can assist the City in prioritizing needs and developing the balance between natural environments and the addition of lighting for safety.

LANDSCAPING CODE AND VEGETATION SAFETY STANDARDS:

CPTED standards suggest that vegetation around homes, business, and parking lots should be shorter than two feet or taller than seven feet. Adhering to this principle allows public sightlines into these areas and eliminates places to loiter or ambush people. Vegetation is sometimes used to screen unsightly elements of a property but in many cases, this only creates unsightly vegetation and an area of isolation on a property. **The City Zoning Code requires landscaping for “screening,” and there are instances where this conflicts with CPTED standards or recommendations.**

At present, the City does not have a requirement that private property vegetation be managed to reduce unsightly, isolated, and potentially dangerous areas or reduce the impact of invasive species. Many property owners voluntarily address these issues but occasionally a property becomes overgrown. **The City may choose to develop an ordinance and associated process for addressing this concern.**

SAFETY WALKS AND OTHER SECURITY REVIEWS:

For many years, City staff has conducted a Safety Walk in the Campustown area. This event uses teams of City staff and local residents to review the lighting, vegetation management, and general condition of an area. This generates a list of repairs that staff can act on while also engaging the local community in conversations around safety in their neighborhood. While these have occasionally been conducted in other areas, it would be helpful to extend this practice to occasional review of City property, facilities, and park areas.

STAFF ACTIVITY AND CSO PATROLS IN PARK AREAS:

City staff will develop a strategy to have more frequent staff reviews or patrols of public areas. For instance, park staff has developed a schedule to review each park, including remote areas of parks, on a regular basis. Similarly, Police will create a schedule that puts CSOs in City parks and on City trails during the summer months. In all cases, City staff is committed to communicating complaints, concerns, or incidents to the Police Department. In turn, the Police Department will follow up on these incidents with investigative resources or additional patrol. Also, Parks and Recreation staff will continue to promote the Park Watch program, which instructs patrons to contact the Police Department if they notice illegal or prohibited activity such as threatening others, damaging property, driving on the grass, or defacing playground equipment.

HOMELESS OUTREACH:

A coalition of various City and community entities has started a homeless outreach initiative. This is intended to locate homeless individuals in the community, establish a supportive and open line of communication, and engage various supportive and social services in aiding the homeless. This activity is coordinated by the Emergency Residence Project but involves law enforcement, social services, medical providers, as well as some City departments and staff.

City departments also make note of unusual activity during their routine work on remote City property. Any areas of concern will be shared with the outreach committee contact person. Camping on City property is prohibited, so a portion of the outreach effort to those on City property involves transferring the person to safer housing alternatives through the Emergency Residence Project. That process includes outreach to the individuals involved; however, if no one can be located at what appears to be a campsite, City staff leaves notice for the camper prior to removing campsite materials.

This effort is not limited to City-owned property. Outreach to persons located on private property is included in this effort.

CPTED EDUCATION FOR STAFF AND THE PUBLIC:

It was clear from committee discussions that crime prevention principles can create safer spaces and reduce fear, uncertainty, and crime in our facilities. In order to apply these crime prevention principles, it may be helpful to offer introductory “Designing for Crime Prevention” seminars for City staff and interested members of the public.

The City is regularly constructing new facilities and renovating existing ones (e.g., Healthy Life Center, Homewood Clubhouse, Water Treatment Plant, renovations to City Hall, various path and trail extensions, etc.) Each project is an opportunity to include crime prevention practices in the design and maintenance. Common issues include City facilities with multiple, uncontrolled entrances and trails or paths in isolated and difficult-to-maintain areas. Including a crime prevention review along with any planned remodeling or updating of facilities can enhance the safety of existing facilities and park amenities.

When planning City operations, it is important to consider the safety of staff, particularly if they are working alone in a remote location or evening and overnight hours. While there may be operational solutions such as cameras, lighting, or scheduling that would increase

the safety of these employees, each of these individual issues may require a unique solution. City staff is further evaluating staff practices for working at remote or isolated locations.

Similarly, the front office staff and field staff in some departments could benefit from a refresher training on workplace safety and handling difficult customers. These sessions have been held previously but employee turnover has occurred and several departmental representatives noted the potential benefits of refresher training in this area.

There are several instances where staff work alone and/or visit non-City locations throughout the community. City departments should provide training to staff to evaluate if a situation is safe for them to enter and complete their work. While Ames has historically been a safe community, it is still important for staff to consider their safety in these environments and for departments to develop a protocol to respond in the event that there are safety concerns in these community settings.

SECURITY CAMERAS:

Security cameras are in use in and around some City properties. This is a valuable resource, but it is important to note that the City is unable to routinely monitor most of these cameras. Strategic camera deployment can be a deterrent. In an evolving incident, rapid access to a City camera system can also be of great benefit to first responders. For that reason, deployment of a common, secure camera system supporting City facilities is a worthwhile goal. Also, identifying locations and the infrastructure necessary to place cameras in the parks and along trails could be part of that system if specific problem areas are identified.

CITY HALL SAFETY COMMITTEE:

As an adjunct to this committee, a subgroup met to discuss the challenges unique to the security of City Hall. Management of after-hours events and security of office spaces were discussed in detail. Several training and internal communication items were noted. A keyless entry system is planned for City Hall and several other City facilities later this year. Until that system is in place, some City Hall safety protocols were discussed and recommended guidelines developed:

- Employees in City Hall after 5 p.m. should lock office doors to the hallways. Employees should take keys with them when using restrooms – no propping doors open. If the interior doors are open, they should be closed and locked after 5 p.m.
- When leaving for the day (after 5 p.m.), interior doors should all be shut and locked (if janitors have not done this)
- Hallway lights should be turned off at the end of the work day if no one is using the meeting rooms
- West exterior door should always be locked after 5 p.m.; East door may be unlocked for meetings

There are now safety lights in each hallway, so once the lights are turned off, people can still see to walk. The recommended guidelines described above should be communicated with City Hall employees, with reminders when inconsistencies are noted.

This committee will continue to meet and discuss areas of concern within City Hall. This group can assist in the rollout of the keyless entry system and discuss identified issues such as severe weather/emergency response plans for City Hall, fire safety concerns, and a contingency plan if the building would be unable to be occupied.

SAFETY HOTLINE TO RISK MANAGER:

In an effort to ensure that City employees have a way of noting their concerns, staff proposes establishing an internal “Safety Hotline” that rings into a recorded line in the Office of the Risk Manager. This would allow internal callers to report concerns with confidence that they would be examined. This mission aligns well with the Risk Manager’s goal of enhancing the safety of the workplace and City facilities for both employees and customers. This also gives employees an alternative in the event that they feel a matter needs urgent attention by the City or by another entity in the area.

On a related note, citizens often call or email the police department with safety concerns. This allows for documentation of the concern and referral or engagement of other departments in addressing the issue. This has worked well, for example, with areas that appear to have developing homeless encampments. The Police Department has been able to mobilize a team involving inspections, police, and social service providers to assess and respond.

NEXT STEPS:

While many of the steps described in this report will be undertaken by City staff as part of its internal efforts to improve safety, some require policy direction from the City Council in order to proceed:

1. Does the Council wish for staff to review the Zoning Code to evaluate the landscaping requirements and their compatibility with CPTED principles?
2. Should staff investigate developing requirements for vegetation on private property to be managed to reduce isolated and potentially dangerous areas?
3. Does the City Council have any further direction regarding the other staff-initiated aspects of this report?