

Staff Report

ARTISTIC FIRE HYDRANT PAINTING

October 12, 2021

BACKGROUND:

On June 8, 2021, the City Council directed staff to explore the possibility of painting fire hydrants in artistic ways as part of the community arts efforts, and to contact the Fire Department, Public Works, and the Public Art Commission (PAC) to identify potential challenges with the project.

The City's Supplemental Specifications to the Statewide Urban Design and Specifications (SUDAS) prescribe that "Public hydrants shall be green in color: #2033 Hydrant Dark Green, silicone enamel, Klinger Paint Company, Cedar Rapids, Iowa."

ISSUES RELATED TO FIRE HYDRANT PAINTING:

1. HYDRANT OPERABILITY

There are a number of issues to consider when evaluating the concept of a fire hydrant painting initiative. Foremost among these is the safety and operability of hydrants in an emergency. It is critical that painting not interfere with the hydrant threads or the nut, or somehow cause interference with the operation of the hydrant. To address this, any hydrant painted by community members would need to be inspected by City staff upon completion.

2. HYDRANT VISIBILITY

Hydrants must be highly visible as fire crews approach them in an emergency, to avoid any delay that could result in increasing harm to life or property. Currently, with all public hydrants colored green (and ISU hydrants painted in a different, but uniform paint scheme), fire crews have a consistent color to look out for on arrival at a fire scene. This makes training new firefighters easier and reduces the identification time on scene (other fire-related equipment is painted in standard colors for quick identification, such as red sprinkler components or gray natural gas services). Additionally, certain colors could cause a fire hydrant to be less visible depending on the conditions (large white painted areas in winter, blue or black paint at night, etc.).

3. PROGRAM SCALE AND POTENTIAL FOR UNAUTHORIZED PAINTING

There are approximately 2,990 public fire hydrants in the City of Ames. One method to mitigate the issues described above (operability and visibility) would be to implement a small program, which would allow staff to closely monitor the

uniquely painted hydrants. However, staff is concerned that a small, closely monitored painting program could inspire individuals to paint hydrants in other locations without staff's knowledge. This would make it difficult for City staff to inspect hydrants for compliance and avoid the issues identified above.

4. ARTISTIC PAINT MAINTENANCE

The City has an aggressive program of annual flushing and data collection to ensure the operability of the hydrants in our system. This is due in part because hydrants are costly component of the water infrastructure to replace (approximately \$2,700 each plus labor costs). The City's Utility Maintenance staff replaces approximately 10 hydrants per year due to damage and component failure. In addition to annual operation of the hydrants for flushing, Utility Maintenance staff also operates hydrants during water main breaks, during construction projects that include new water main work, and while checking hydrant drains prior to winter.

This routine maintenance work is likely to mar any artistic painting with hydrant wrenches, necessitating touch-ups from the artist. Currently, touch-up painting can be easily accomplished due to the uniform color used throughout Ames. Failure to adequately maintain the paint could lead to corrosion and premature failure of hydrant components, particularly as hydrants tend to be placed in the right-of-way where road salt and grit can accumulate. The road salt and grit are also likely to cause artistic paints to deteriorate more quickly. The standard green paint specified for the City's hydrants is formulated for harsh conditions such as these.

Given the susceptibility of artistically painted hydrants to deterioration from the conditions described above, expectations would need to be determined regarding the maintenance of the art; touch-ups would need to be made by either the City or the artist, and conditions would need to be set to determine when the hydrants are to be returned to the standard green color.

PUBLIC ART COMMISSION COMMENTS:

The Public Art Commission (PAC) discussed what might be required to facilitate an artistic fire hydrant painting program. Currently, PAC is administering two special community infrastructure painting initiatives in addition to its annual programs: the electric transformer cabinet wrapping project downtown, and the storm sewer intake educational painting initiative. Both projects involve taking artist proposals over the winter and conducting the painting in the spring. **Due to these obligations, PAC indicated that it preferred not to undertake management of a hydrant painting program at this time.**

NEXT STEPS:

In September, City staff became aware that the original requestor had proceeded to paint a hydrant adjacent his house prior to receiving a response from the City Council regarding the request for a formal painting program (see photo at right). Staff has had several discussions with the requestor about the hydrant and the concerns described above. Crews from the Fire Department inspected the hydrant to verify its operability.

The Fire Chief discussed these concerns with the requestor, who acknowledged them and indicated that he was willing to see the hydrant painted back to its standard green color.



OPTIONS:

- 1. Do not implement a fire hydrant painting program at this time.** If the City Council chooses this option, then City staff will proceed with repainting the hydrant to the standard dark green, assuming that enough warm weather days remain in the fall to complete the painting.
- 2. Direct the Public Art Commission to work with City staff to develop a formal fire hydrant painting program.** If this option is selected, City staff would work with PAC to create program criteria, identify suitable locations, and determine the level of funding necessary to implement a fire hydrant painting program. A program would not be launched until spring 2022, when the weather is warm enough to provide a suitable window for painters to work. The hydrant that is already painted would remain as-is until PAC could determine the lifespan of hydrant art painted under the program. PAC may need to re-prioritize some of its other initiatives to free up enough administrative capacity to administer the hydrant painting program.

STAFF COMMENTS:

Due to the workload of the Public Art Commission and the issues identified by City staff that would need to be resolved prior to implementing a hydrant program, it is staff's recommendation that the City Council not pursue a hydrant painting program at this time.