



Memo

Department of Planning & Housing

Item No. 2

TO: Mayor and City Council
FROM: Steve Osguthorpe, Planning & Housing Director
DATE: September 16, 2011
SUBJECT: Council Workshop – City Landscaping Standards

Among your City Council goals for 2010-12 is the following:

- **Further streamline and improve government processes**
 - Work to make City Council meetings and City processes more efficient and effective
 - Revisit City codes, policies, and procedures to streamline processes
 - Promote Ames as a welcoming place to do business by embracing a “Can Do” attitude

During review of projects, staff puts forth considerable effort both assessing whether a proposed development is consistent with Council’s adopted standards, and identifying creative ways to meet developers’ objectives within the bounds of our codes. **One of the more challenging sections of City code to implement has been the Chapter pertaining to landscaping standards**, both in terms of how the standards are applied during project review and approval, and how required landscaping is maintained over time. While reviewing their proposed development projects, staff has received various complaints and comments from development customers regarding the City’s current landscaping standards. Both staff and developers have noted that the end result of installed landscaping is often lacking, both in terms of its visual impact and perhaps even its environmental effects.

At this workshop, staff will share a PowerPoint presentation illustrating the challenges and the possibilities in how landscaping is applied in Ames and in urban settings. The presentation will address many of the complaints we commonly receive.

Since this is the first time Council will be exposed to this subject, staff would like to use the workshop to bring basic background information on these landscaping issues to the Council and to answer questions on this subject. Ultimately, staff is seeking direction from Council on whether we should (1) maintain the status quo on landscaping standards and maintenance, (2) more fully enforce our existing maintenance standards, (3) amend the City’s landscaping standards (either enhance or relax), or (4) completely eliminate the landscaping standards. However, this is too big of an issue to both present and resolve in the same evening. If at the end of the workshop Council desires to pursue this subject further, we will arrange a follow-up time to allow more focused discussion and direction. That would allow time to seek public input, and for Council to reflect on the information presented before deciding on any specific course of action.

SO\clh

City of Ames Landscape Standards

- Standards primarily in Section 29.403
- Landscaping generally required:
 - Along perimeter of commercial parking lots (5 ft.min.)
 - In setbacks abutting residential zoned lots (between 5 & 20 feet)
 - Within yards of apartment buildings
 - 15 - 20% of some commercial & industrial lots
 - 25% of Hospital/Medical Zone lots
 - 40% of single family home lots
- Additional requirements for some overlay zones

- Landscaping may be used as alternative method to screen mechanical units.

- Definition:
"Landscaping means the improvement of a lot, parcel or tract of land with grass, shrubs and/or trees. Landscaping may include pedestrian walks, flowerbeds, ornamental features such as fountains, statuary, and other similar natural and artificial objects design and arranged to produce an aesthetically pleasing effect."

QUESTIONS

Are current standards working in terms of what they require?

Are they accomplishing our intended purpose?

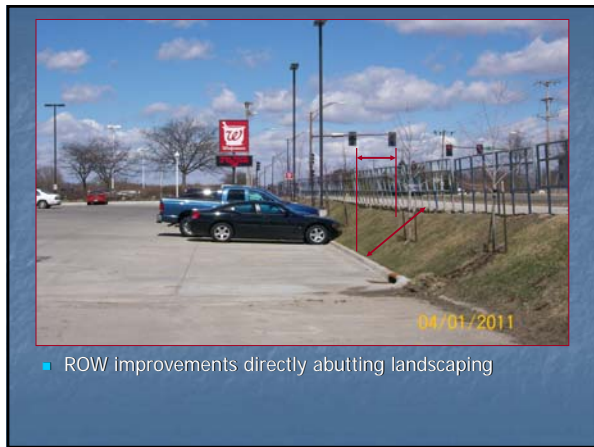
Issues

- Providing sufficient room for landscaping.
 - Tendency to maximize site with other improvements.
 - Maximized coverage forces required landscaping to overlap utility easements.
- Retaining what has been planted.
 - Landscaping is often poorly maintained
 - Landscaping often dies
 - Landscaping is often removed

Maximizing site



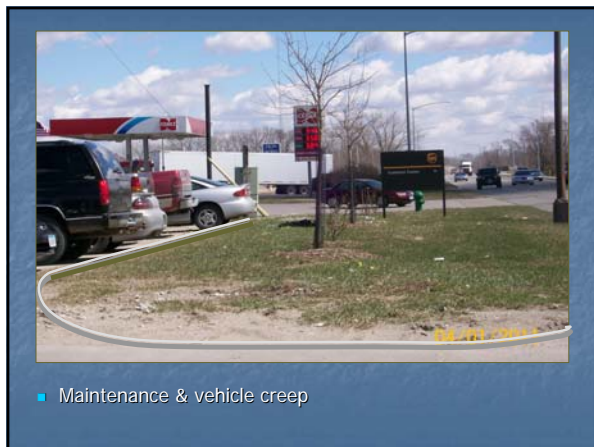
- Minimum-width landscaping visually expanded into ROW



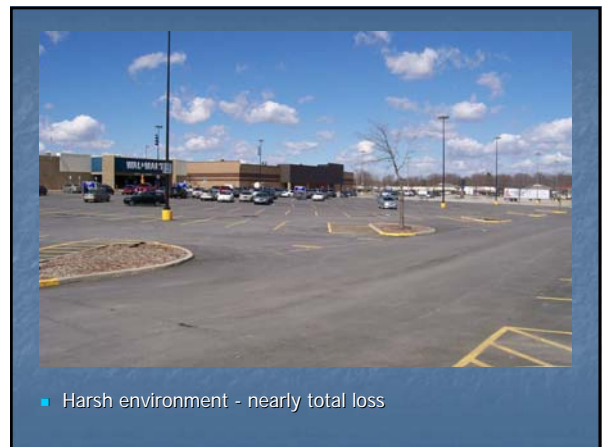
- ROW improvements directly abutting landscaping



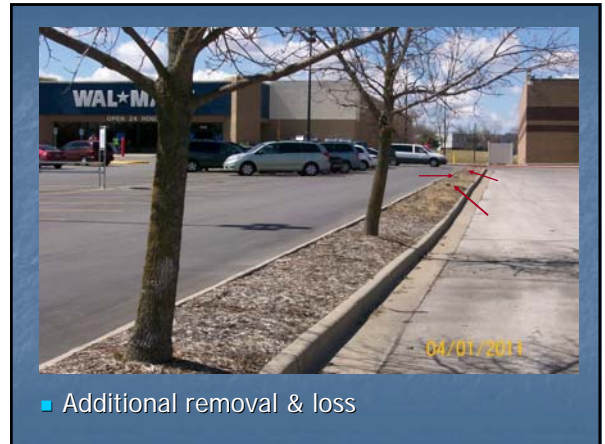
Encroachments into minimal area with curbs and walls



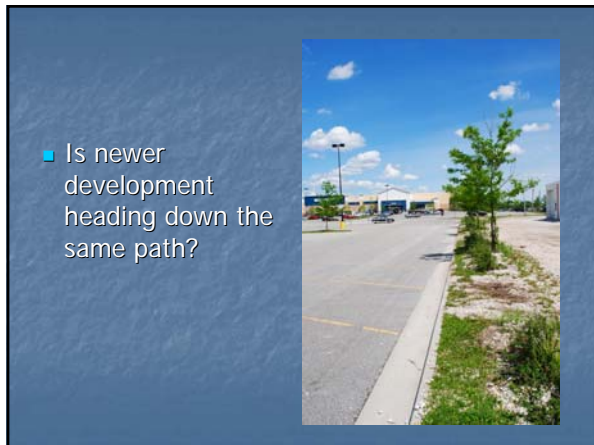
- Maintenance & vehicle creep



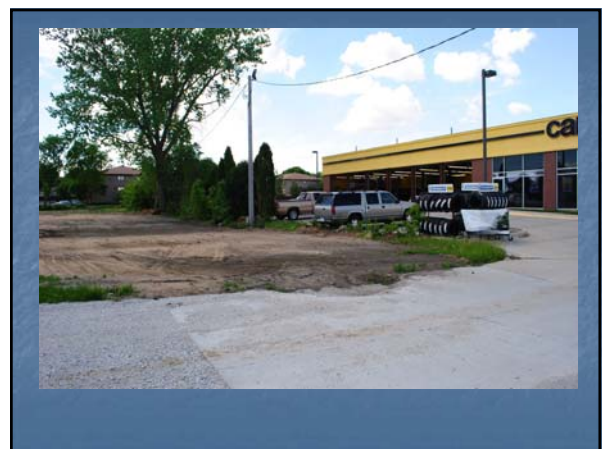
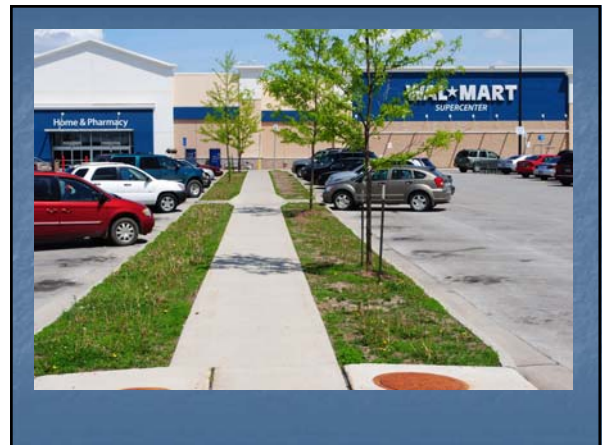
- Harsh environment - nearly total loss

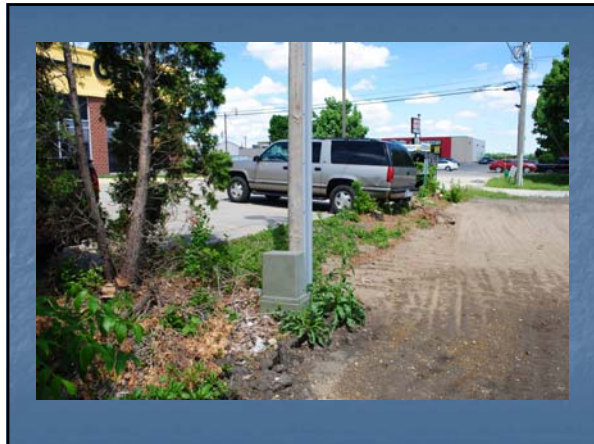


■ Additional removal & loss



■ Is newer development heading down the same path?





Issues

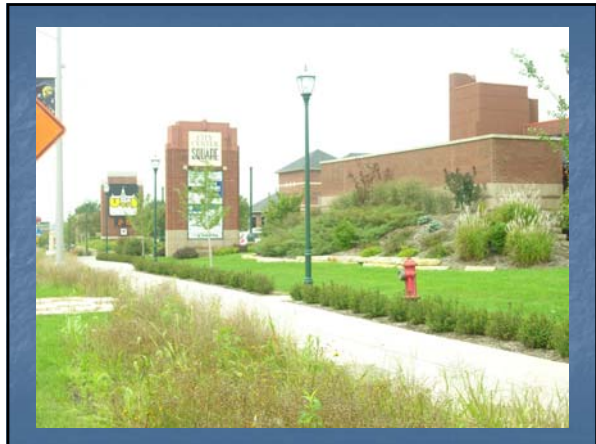
- Common complaints about required landscaping:
 - Takes up space needed for parking lots
 - "It's going to die anyway, so why require it?"
 - Conflicts with utility locations and transformer visibility
 - Obscures visibility of buildings and/or signs
 - Spacing requirement for trees and shrubs are too dense for plant health.
 - Required plantings will not survive in this climate
 - Doesn't account for snow storage

Responses to Concerns

Does Landscaping take up parking-lot space?

- Yes. More parking could be provided without landscaping





Will Landscaping die anyway?

- Landscaping will die:
 - under poor conditions.





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 - under poor conditions.
 - **without regular maintenance**

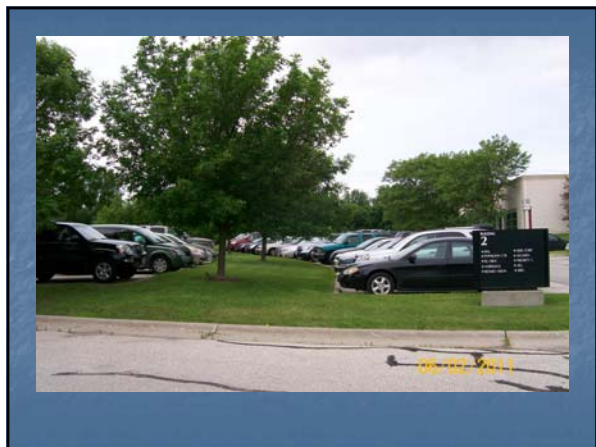
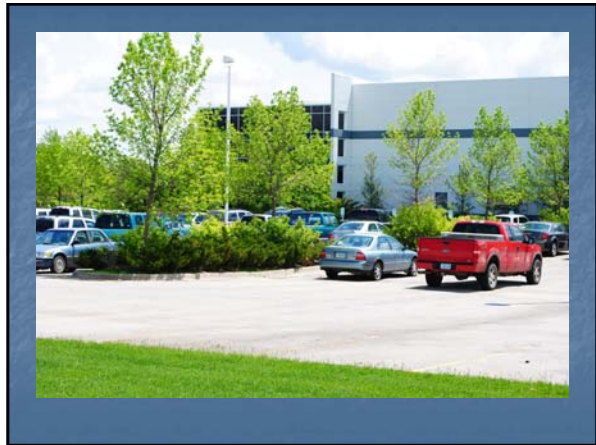
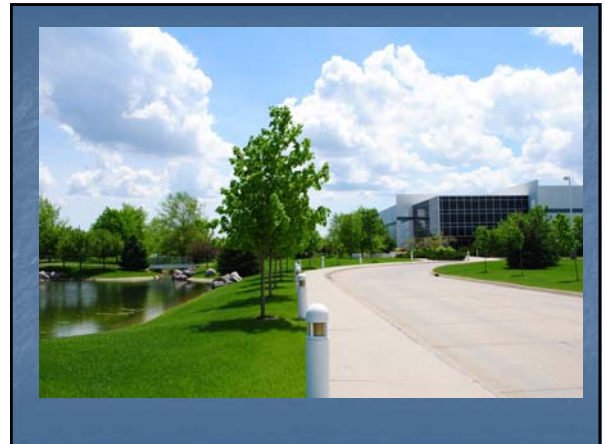


Will Landscaping die anyway?

Landscaping will die:

- under poor conditions.
- without regular maintenance
- **if it's not tolerant of snow storage**

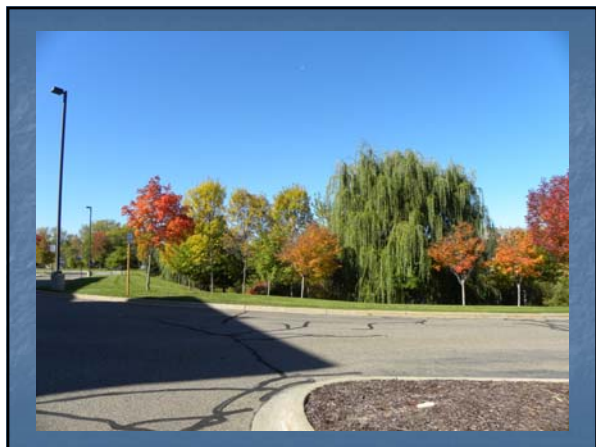
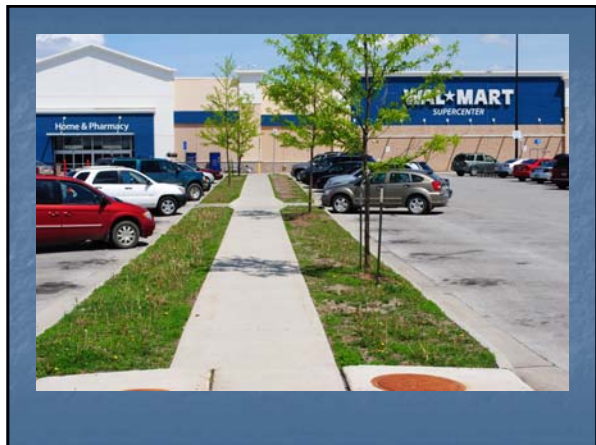
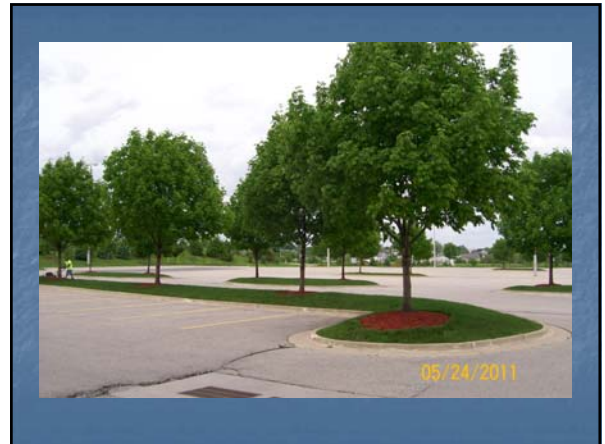
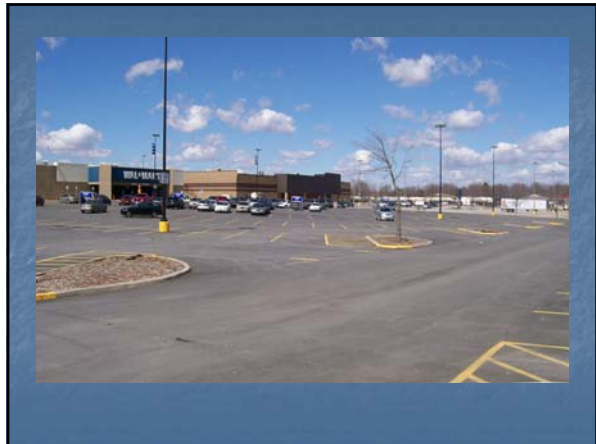


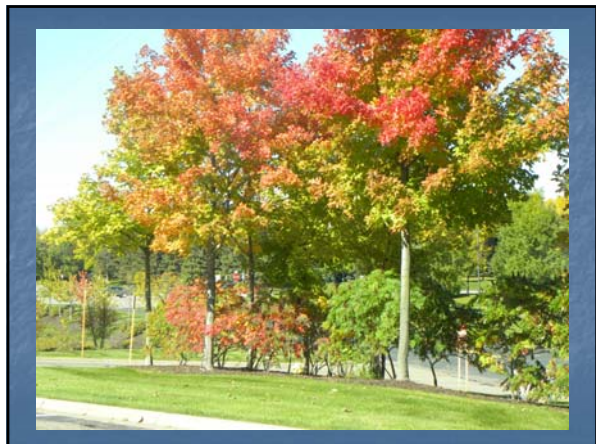


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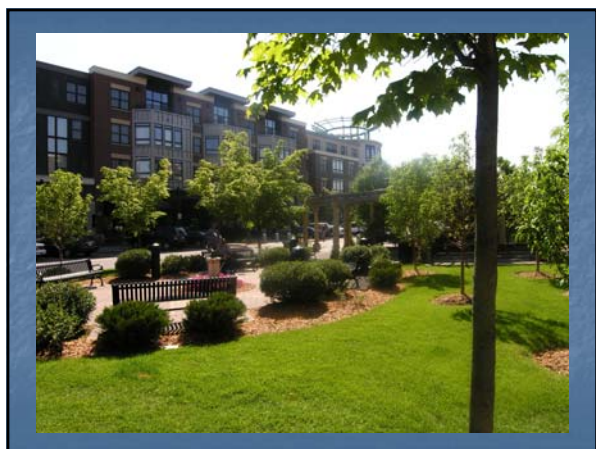
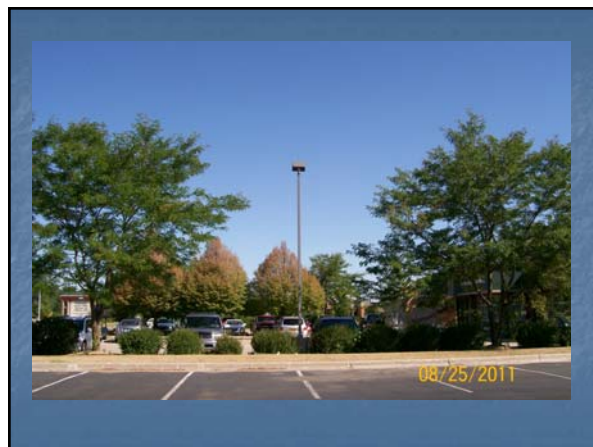
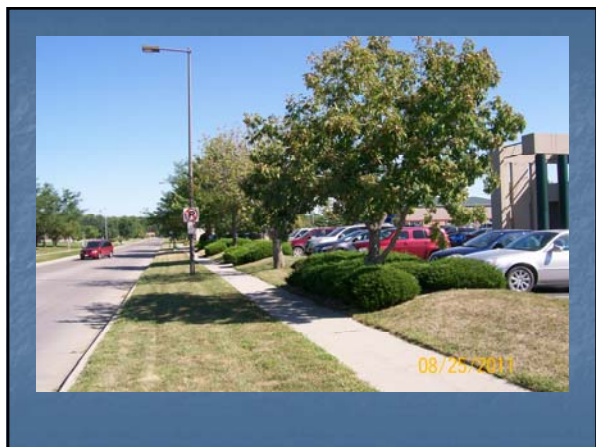
- under poor conditions.
- without regular maintenance
- if it's not tolerant of snow storage
- **Without needed irrigation**





Do our tree and shrub spacing standards result in unhealthy plants?

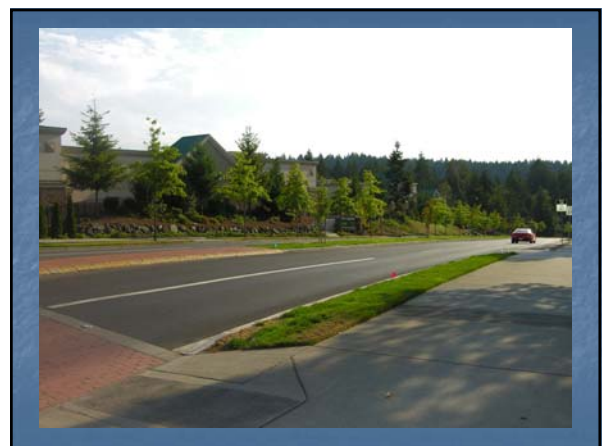
- No.
 - Average spacing in mature forest: 15-20 feet.
 - Maximum spacing of street trees in City code: 30 – 50 feet. (Depending on species)

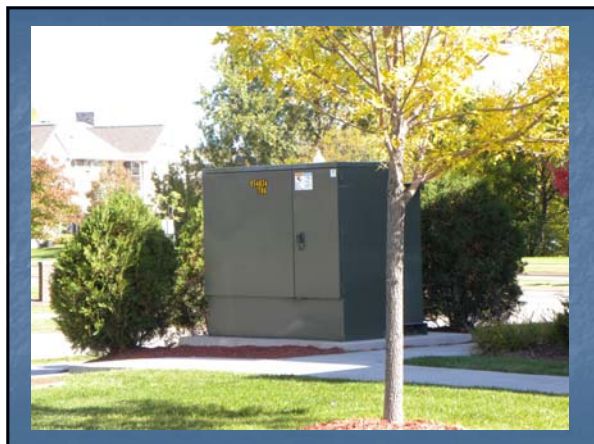
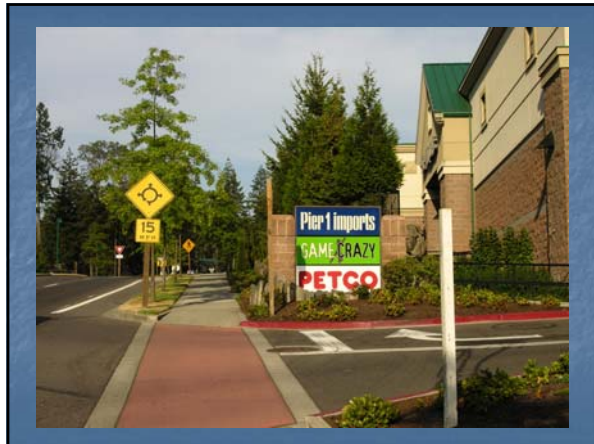




Does landscaping affect utility location?

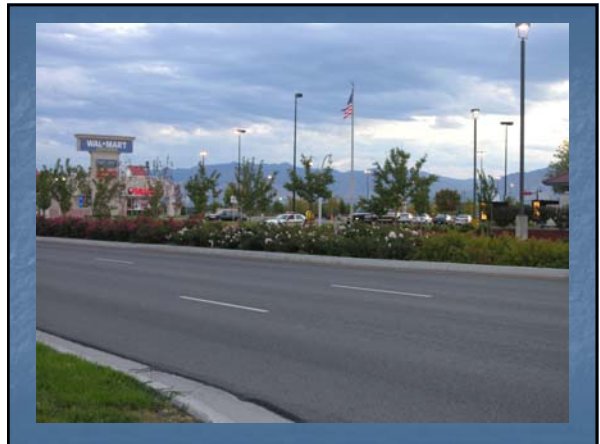
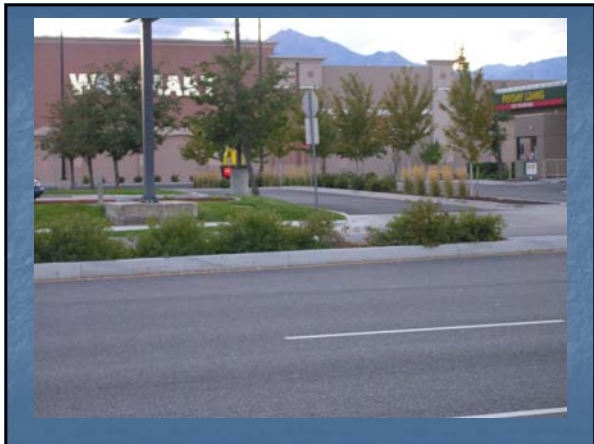
- Yes, particularly for trees and shrubs

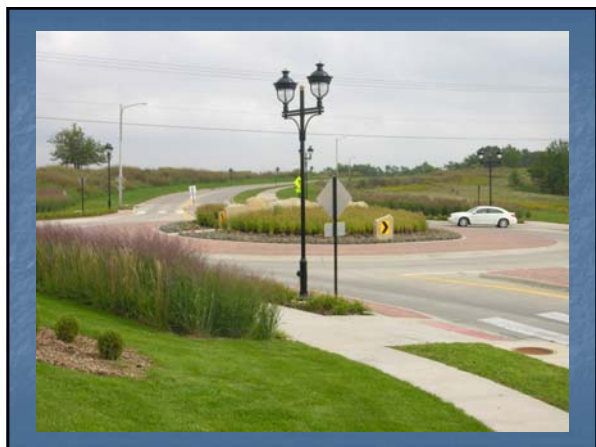
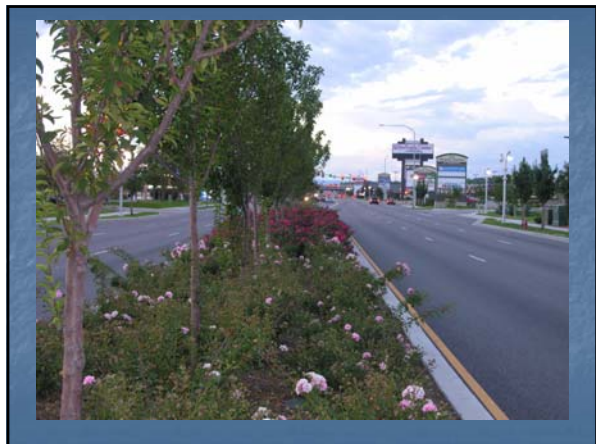




Does landscaping obscure visibility of buildings and signs?

- Yes. Is that bad for business?





Are we on the right path?

- Are current standards effective?
- Is the result worth the effort?
- Do our standards need better on-going enforcement?
- Should we let development monitor itself?

Options

1. Maintain status quo
2. Retain and enforce current standards
3. Eliminate current standards. That would:
 1. address current complaints
 2. simplify review process
 3. eliminate current violations
4. Amend current standards. That may be necessary if . . .

- ... we would like to ensure more of this .



What ever option we choose . . .

- It's not about the Midwest climate
- It's not that landscaping can't survive here
- In the same climate types and in similar settings, we find
 - Function or enhanced aesthetic
 - More full landscaping or flexibility in parking
 - Minimal upkeep or maintenance intensive

Function . . .



and enhanced aesthetic;

Parking flexibility . . .



and parking with fuller landscaping;

Minimal maintenance . . .



and maintenance intensive.

What is the right balance?

The type, quantity and condition of landscaping can be a significant contribution to the aesthetic quality and economic vitality of a community . . .

But few things take more care and resources to achieve and maintain.



Possible Next Steps

- Follow-up meeting with City Council
- Planning & Zoning Commission Workshop
- Focus Groups
- Other?

End