

Staff Report

REQUEST FROM ISU RESEARCH PARK FOR ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT - OFF-STREET PARKING AREAS AND DRIVEWAY STANDARDS FOR AGRICULTURAL EQUIPMENT

August 26, 2025

BACKGROUND:

On July 8, City Council received a request letter from the Iowa State University Research Park (ISURP) to review paving requirements in the Research Park Innovation District (RI) Zone (see attached request letter). ISURP anticipates a new development south of its current boundaries that will entail large agricultural equipment storage and testing.

ISURP seeks an amendment to zoning standards to exempt parking and maneuvering areas that also serve agricultural equipment from paving requirements. Due to the large amount of maneuvering area on a proposed development site, there would be substantial cost savings between concrete and rock surface.

The subject property is in the process of annexation, and once annexed, is anticipated to be rezoned to Research Park and Innovation District (RI) (see attached location map). **Staff provided a background memo prior to the August 12 City Council meeting, at which time the request was referred to a future agenda.**

ISURP representatives described their preliminary plans to staff. Equipment will be parked on site, both in buildings and outdoor areas; and maneuvered between buildings, to a test track area, and adjoining fields for testing.

At issue with their preliminary design is the area for maneuvering between buildings that is not solely for equipment testing or field access. **This is because the City's standards require that all vehicle parking and maneuvering areas are required to be paved per the City's Improvement Standards for Off-Street Parking Areas and Driveways.**

The test track area and other testing areas where gravel or dirt are functionally necessary are not required to be paved. Areas for heavy equipment storage also have been exempt.

The ISURP request is focused on agricultural equipment, but other industrial uses relying on heavy trucks or other equipment would also likely desire to have an option for reduced paving, such as batch plants, contractor storage, seed companies, truck hauling, etc. A similar issue was discussed with Wyffels in 2024 for its planned truck seed unloading area.

CURRENT PAVING REQUIREMENT:

The issue of paving arises from time to time for industrial properties. Rock or gravel maneuvering areas are a lower-cost option compared to paving and less intensive industrial uses with less building area prefer low cost site development improvements. **Stormwater treatment requirements will apply to either surface material.**

The City has required paving for all types of areas since 2000 to ensure sites are developed consistently and in a compatible manner. This is particularly important for high-traffic sites, where unpaved surfaces degrade quickly and could cause dust and noise issues. Only equipment storage areas separate from maneuvering areas are considered exempt from the requirement and the extent of paving is determined on a case-by-case basis. Council has approved two recent amendments to the paving standard:

1. **Basic Utilities Exception:** An exception exists for basic utilities (electric substations, water towers, etc.) and other similar uses, which are anticipated to have a low traffic volume, warranting the exception. The exception is subject to approval by the Planning Director.
2. **Long Driveway Exception:** An exception for driveways over 300 feet in length for single-family homes on agricultural, rural, or wooded lots, approved by the Zoning Board of Adjustment.

These exceptions still require paved approaches, paved vehicle parking areas, and landscaping as otherwise required.

OPTIONS:

The ISURP request is specific to agricultural equipment, but could apply to other uses of equipment as well. The request can be addressed by modifying general zoning standards or potentially altering a specific base zoning standard. The ISURP letter did not identify a preferred approach for relief from the paving standard.

The first three options would address the request and could be applied for by the ISURP as the applicant.

1. **Within the Research Park Innovation District (RI), exclude agricultural equipment areas from paving requirements, as an accessory function and for areas behind a principal building, subject to approval by the Planning Director.**

This is the most narrow option as it only applies to one zoning district, RI, and to ag equipment. This option would be similar to the basic utility exception where staff would determine what areas are distinguished for paved maneuvering and parking. No notice or public review occurs with this option.

Allowing for larger nonpaved areas is counter to the original intent of RI zoning that was intended to facilitate higher quality design for R&D, office, and small manufacturing uses rather than lower intensity industrial uses.

It would be important to maintain the other design requirements of RI and to only

allow this type of paving exception in low visibility areas and as an accessory use to a principal building. Standalone unpaved storage areas would not be allowed to ensure that the land is efficiently used for the intended uses and not as general industrial uses.

- 2. Within the Research Park Innovation District (RI) exclude agricultural equipment areas from paving requirements, with approval by the Zoning Board of Adjustment.**

ZBA approval offers greater discretion for review and notification compared to staff approval of minor site development plans, particularly regarding potential nuisances from unpaved surfaces.

- 3. Create a city-wide industrial zoning paving exception process for truck loading, ag/construction equipment areas with ZBA approval as a Special Use Permit.**

This option would be broader than the initial request and would allow for future users to request similar relief. Because of the wide range of potential properties and circumstances it would be appropriate to require ZBA approval to allow for notification and public input.

- 4. Take no action and maintain current requirements.**

If there is no action by Council, the use remains allowed and the ISRUP can still proceed with its project. The vehicle parking and maneuvering areas would be required to be paved under the current standards as is required across the city for all uses. Storage areas and test areas would remain exempt from paving requirements.

STAFF COMMENTS:

The issue raised in this request is primarily related to cost of site improvements rather than functionality or allowing for a use. The amendment is not functionally necessary for the equipment testing use. Other equipment testing tracks in Ames, such as at Danfoss, have a paved maneuvering area that leads to the dirt and gravel testing area or test fields.

Previous amendments to the paving standard were for uses with low traffic volumes. This issue is not about volume of traffic, but primarily about internal circulation occurring on a site on a regular basis. Regardless of the ag maneuvering area, the regular site access and parking would still be required to be paved.

Staff does not believe an specific public outreach process is needed for any of the options. If Council allows the request to move forward, ISRUP would submit a text amendment application and it would proceed to the Planning and Zoning Commission for a recommendation and then return to City Council for consideration of an Ordinance to amend the zoning standards.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[Request Letter and Map](#)