

ITEM #:	25
DATE:	12-09-25
DEPT:	P&H

## COUNCIL ACTION FORM

**SUBJECT: ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT FOR LANDSCAPING ROCK MULCH WITHIN PLANTER AREAS**

**BACKGROUND:**

Representatives of the Iowa State University Research Park (ISURP) recently contacted City Council with a request to consider a text amendment to allow the use of rock mulch where the City standards require organic mulch material. The request is in response to a site condition where rock was inappropriately used for some of the front yard landscaping areas. Other areas of the site, such as the parking lot, are in compliance with the City landscaping requirements for use of organic mulch.

**City Council considered the request, authorizing a Zoning Text Amendment application from the ISURP for changes to the landscaping standards regarding decorative rock for use as landscape area mulch, which would then apply citywide on October 14.**

The City's landscape standards were comprehensively rewritten and approved by the City Council in 2017. The City's landscape standards focus on use of vegetation as ground cover with specific minimum plantings for front yard landscaping and parking lot landscaping. With adoption of the new standards, one of the questions discussed at that time was whether to continue with the living ground cover and use of organic mulch in required planters compared to a development community request to have an option to utilize rock. At that time, staff described the benefits for plant health with organic material compared to rock and contrasted the maintenance differences for the owner. Generally, rock is more expensive than organic mulch and has less annual maintenance.

Staff also asked the City's landscape architect consultant to provide an opinion regarding the use of mulch compared to rocks. Use of rock versus mulch varied by community and in the landscape architect's professional opinion, mulch is better, but rock does not necessarily impede plant vitality. It was emphasized that plant vitality is more dependent on having soil with high organic content and performing general upkeep, rather than mulch type.

**PROPOSED TEXT AMENDMENT:**

The City's general standards are for all areas of a site that are landscaped areas must include living ground cover or other plants materials. Mulch in planter areas with trees or shrubs is acceptable as an alternative to living ground cover. **The proposed change would allow inorganic mulch material of decorative landscaping rock in lieu of organic mulch material.**

**It is important to emphasize that use of rock as mulch would not serve as a substitute for planted materials used as landscaping.** Language has been incorporated to indicate that areas of rock without plantings are not acceptable to meet the landscaping requirement. No specification of the rock type is proposed with this change, but the landscape plan must

indicate what material is proposed for use in a landscape planter. Pictures of rock and organic mulch planter examples are attached for reference.

The proposed change affects the following section of the City's General Development Standards of Article IV of the Chapter 29 Zoning Ordinance (new language is underlined).

29.403 (3) (D) Minimum planting standards.

(7) All required planters, bufferyards, and islands must include living groundcover. Foundation planters may use inorganic or non-living materials for ground cover. Organic mulch may be used in lieu of living ground cover beneath or around shrubs and trees.

a. An exception to utilize decorative landscape rock materials, in lieu of organic mulch, may be approved for areas within required planters immediately around decorative plantings, shrubs and trees. Details of the landscape rock material type and location shall be specified on the landscape plan. Decorative plantings may be required within planters along with the use of decorative landscape rock.

Decorative landscape rock in and of itself does not meet the definition of landscaping, therefore, it may not be utilized in lieu of landscape plantings and is to be confined to defined planter areas with shrubs, trees, and decorative plantings.

b. Decorative landscape rock materials are subject to the standards and limitations of other zoning districts, such as CSC and the University Impact Overlays.

**Planning and Zoning Commission:**

The Planning and Zoning Commission reviewed the proposed text amendment at its November 5 meeting. Commissioners discussed the examples of planters with rock materials compared to mulch. Commissioners expressed concerns about the general health of plantings, depth and type of rock used for mulch, the appearance of rock planters (specifically if landscape material died or were not present), and the overall aesthetics of the proposal. Staff described that code enforcement does not prioritize landscape maintenance and a refresh of plantings typically does not occur unless a subsequent permit for the site is requested. **The Commission voted 5-1 to recommend denial of the text amendment.** Generally, the Commissioners were concerned about its city-wide application to parking lot and front yard landscaping and believed the current standard was a better standard.

**ALTERNATIVES:**

1. Approve on first reading an ordinance amending the allowed landscaping planter mulch requirements to allow use of decorative rock landscape material as mulch consistent with the attached draft ordinance.
2. Direct staff to modify the proposed standards and approve the ordinance on first reading.
3. Request additional information from staff and take no action to approve on first reading.
4. Deny the application for a zoning text amendment. (Planning and Zoning Commission Recommendation)

**CITY MANAGER'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

The issue of landscape planter materials is a city-wide issue and not unique to any one zoning district. As such, the request would modify standards city-wide and benefit ISURP as the applicant. The use of decorative rock versus organic mulch is primarily a balancing of aesthetics, plant vitality, and cost.

**Staff believes that with intentional landscape design focused on the base requirements of planting and limited use of mulch combined with the organic soil content requirements, the decorative rock mulch option will likely be a successful alternative for developments.** Therefore, it is the recommendation of the City Manager that the City Council approve Alternative No. 1, as described above.

**ATTACHMENT(S):**

[Rock Mulch Attachment Landscape Examples.pdf](#)  
[Ordinance-ZTA Minimum Planting Standards-Mulch.PDF](#)