

COMMISSION ACTION FORM

SUBJECT: ZONING ORDINANCE TEXT AMENDMENT RELATED TO SCREENING AND LANDSCAPING AROUND MECHANICAL EQUIPMENT

BACKGROUND:

The City of Ames Electrical Services is attempting to relocate underground electrical vaults in the downtown to a surface mount location due, in part, to new safety rules for accessing underground utility vaults. Because the downtown is largely already developed, there are few locations on the surface to place electrical vaults, especially within rights-of-way. Existing rights-of-way – particularly alleys – are barely wide enough to allow vehicular passage. The Electrical Department has therefore been contacting private property owners to see if they would be willing to sell the City easements to place the vaults on their properties. This option also has space constraints because in many cases, the only on-site areas in downtown lots where utility vaults might be placed are in the code-required landscaped areas for parking lots.

Currently, Section 29.201(116) defines a *Mechanical Unit* as “a climate control device and/or a piece of hardware used for the delivery or measurement of utilities that is located above ground and is clearly visible.” Section 29.408(4) provides screening requirements for mechanical equipment, as follows:

“Mechanical Equipment. For all uses, except for single-family and two-family dwellings, all mechanical equipment located on the ground, such as cooling or heating equipment, pumps or generators, shall be substantially screened from the street and any abutting residential properties by a partially sight obscuring fence and/or shrubs. Such fence and/or shrubs shall be at least six inches higher than the height of the mechanical equipment. All mechanical equipment mounted on roofs or on the walls of buildings, shall be completely screened from the ground level of any abutting residentially zoned lot and substantially screened from all other adjacent properties at any level, with materials that are consistent with the architectural materials used on the exterior of the building.

Staff believes that both the screening requirements for mechanical equipment and code-required landscaping are essential for both aesthetic and environmental reasons, but also recognizes the need to balance such benefits with the provision of needed services. The City Council has therefore directed staff to develop code amendments that would provide exceptions to applicable landscaping requirement to facilitate necessary and unanticipated upgrades to utility services when standard landscaping and screening requirements cannot otherwise be met. The exceptions would not apply to new development where space needs can be predetermined at the platting and site plan level. Accordingly, staff has drafted the following changes for the Planning & Zoning Commission’s consideration:

Section 29.201(116) would be revised to eliminate from the definition of “mechanical unit” unnecessary and potential confusing language regarding the placement of a mechanical unit, and would read as follows:

Section 29.201(116) **Mechanical Unit** means a climate control device and/or a piece of hardware used for the delivery or measurement of utilities, ~~that is located above ground and is clearly visible.~~

Section 29.201(116) would be revised to ensure consistent use of the term “mechanical unit” as defined in the zoning code, and would read as follows:

Section 29.408(4) Mechanical **Equipment Units**. For all uses, except for single-family and two-family dwellings, all mechanical ~~equipment units~~ located on the ground, such as cooling or heating equipment, pumps or generators, shall be substantially screened from the street and any abutting residential properties by a partially sight obscuring fence and/or shrubs. Such fence and/or shrubs shall be at least six inches higher than the height of the mechanical equipment. All mechanical equipment mounted on roofs or on the walls of buildings, shall be completely screened from the ground level of any abutting residentially zoned lot and substantially screened from all other adjacent properties at any level, with materials that are consistent with the architectural materials used on the exterior of the building.

A new Section 29.403(6) would be adopted, to read as follows:

(6) Screening and placement of mechanical units. Mechanical units must meet all screening requirements of Section 29.408(4) and must be located outside of required landscape areas. However, in situations where upgrades or relocations of mechanical units for utility services are necessary to provide continued service, the Director of Planning & Housing may approve placement of mechanical units in required landscape areas, and may also waive screening requirements of mechanical units, if the Director determines that such upgrades or relocations could not have been anticipated either at the time of platting or at the time of site development when the utilities were first planned and/or installed, and that there is insufficient room for the relocated or upgraded utility mechanical units to be screened or placed outside of required landscape areas.

ALTERNATIVES:

1. The Planning and Zoning Commission can recommend that the City Council adopt the zoning text amendments as described above.
2. The Planning and Zoning Commission can recommend that the City Council adopt the zoning text amendments described above, but with modifications.
3. The Planning and Zoning Commission can recommend that the City Council not adopt the proposed zoning text amendments.

4. The Planning and Zoning Commission refer this issue to staff for further information.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

In most cases, the proposed revisions would not loosen current landscaping and screening standards because the application of the revised standards would be limited. The revisions would apply to unforeseen situations where there are no other reasonable alternatives to allow needed upgrades or relocations of mechanical units, and would ensure a balance between needed services and the benefits otherwise realized by current landscaping standards.

Therefore, staff recommends that the Planning & Zoning Commission act in accordance with Alternative 1, which is to recommend that the City Council adopt the zoning text amendment as described above.