

**MINUTES
CITY OF AMES
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION**

Date: February 1, 2012	Debra Lee	2012
	Chuck Jons	2012
Call to Order: 7:00 p.m.	Elizabeth Beck, Chairperson	2012
	Norman Cloud, Vice-Chairperson	2013
Place: Ames City Hall	Mark Stenberg	2013
Council Chambers	Jeff Johnson	2014
	*Troy Siefert	2014
Adjournment: 8:20 p.m.	*Absent	

MAJOR TOPICS DISCUSSED:

1. Landscaping Standards Review Process

CALL TO ORDER: Elizabeth Beck, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

MOTION: (JONS/STENBERG) to approve the Agenda for the meeting of February 1, 2012.

MOTION PASSED: 6-0

APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF JANUARY 18, 2012:

MOTION: (JOHNSON/CLOUD) to approve the Minutes of the meeting of January 18, 2012.

MOTION PASSED: 6-0

PUBLIC FORUM: There were no public comments.

Landscaping Standards Review Process

Steve Osguthorpe, director, explained that the City Council has referred to staff a review of the landscaping standards based on a number of comments and complaints received over the years over the current standards. A PowerPoint presentation was given depicting current landscaping issues, outlining some of the more common complaints of landscaping standards, and illustrating various problems and successes in incorporating landscaping into development sites and streetscapes.

Discussion after the presentation:

Jeff Johnson said he works in an environment that makes landscaping part of their branding and is a part of the quality of life for their employees and their visitors. Landscaping adds value, gives a sense of welcome, and says a lot about how we care about what happens; that this is not just a transactional environment. Some of the pictures shown tonight make it seem that Ames is more like a transaction, which makes him question what the vision is for our city.

Mr. Johnson said he considers art to be a big part of landscaping and was surprised to see that it is not included as part of the definition for landscaping. Staff mentioned that the definition for landscaping was not up-to-date and is interested to see if art is included in the updated definition.

Mr. Johnson referenced the slide shown by the Applebee's Restaurant. He noted that stepping stones were artistically done within the landscaped area because they knew people would cross the street outside of the crosswalks through the landscaped area. He suggested that stepping stones be considered in places where people tend to walk through the landscaping when trying to get from point A to point B.

Mr. Johnson said the City needs to be a role model for its own landscaping around the areas for which it is responsible. Sometimes the best way to have followers is to be seen as a leader to create the culture for which we are demanding by policy.

Chuck Jons said there are different facets that are handled by different divisions of the City. For example, the requirement for what kinds of trees can be planted is handled by a different department than Planning and Housing. The department responsible for the trees should have known that ash trees should not be planted; however, until about a year ago ash trees were still on the list. Mr. Jons further stated that the City should be more direct in what kind of landscaping is needed. Developers will oftentimes seek out the cheapest trees in order to fulfill their landscaping. If the area to be landscaped is a small area and irrigation is not going to happen, then we need to require plants that are more tolerant of the dry conditions. He said he hopes we can streamline things within the City organization, and endorses Jeff's suggestion that the City itself be a role model.

Mr. Jons said it was mentioned during the presentation that one of the complaints the City frequently hears is that student apartments and those kinds of developments are kept in tight line by the City regulators. He said it surprises him that we haven't been following the same enforcement process for the other types of developments.

Mr. Osguthorpe said the big question for him is asking the City Council if it is time to begin an enforcement program to at least maintain what is required. He said until we get some direction from the Council, he is hesitant to move forward with enforcement. The problem is so widespread that it is hard to know where to begin without it looking like the City is picking on one individual property owner.

Mr. Johnson said a city-wide beautification campaign would come across less about enforcement. You can take a presentation like the one that was just shown and turn it into a campaign for beautification to arrive at the standards with enforcement from that point forward.

Mr. Jons said the most dramatic pictures were the ones with color from annual plantings. He asked if staff could write annuals into the code. Mr. Osguthorpe said annuals are currently not required in the code, but he would like to find a way to encourage them.

Mr. Johnson mentioned that carefree roses and plantings of that nature are hardy and can accomplish the same thing.

Debra Lee said she would like to know if other cities require annuals or what the motivation is for those business owners to use annuals as a choice.

Mark Stenberg said what was noticeably striking in the presentation was the width of the landscaped areas being dramatically larger, which would encourage growth and the ease of

maintenance. Anything would have a hard time growing in a parking lot with 20 ends that are two feet wide; however, it might be easier for things to grow in one large area like what was depicted in the pictures.

Mr. Osguthorpe said it is the microclimates that are created that we really need to be mindful of. Sometimes a larger cluster is healthier as a microclimate than smaller things that are surrounded by hot asphalt.

Mr. Stenberg said maybe there is a way of doing that without having to necessarily change the percentage of landscaping versus parking stalls. Giving the landscaping a chance to survive and thrive is definitely going to look better than a bunch of small little islands with landscaping that didn't survive.

Mr. Osguthorpe said one of the things we will have to balance is the heat island effect. There are successful examples of where development has included trees to create a continuous canopy that were located in numerous small areas; but it was the prep, maintenance, and the overall design that was really crucial. If they aren't going to do it at that level, we should probably look at a more flexible, straight forward approach to clustering and achieving the same area, which is one of the objectives that we are going to be looking at in this review process.

Mr. Johnson asked what is meant by the automobile light issue when it states *reduce the effects of automobile lights*. Mr. Osguthorpe explained that there may be a commercial project next to a residential area and the screening of automobile lights into a neighboring property is something that will need to be looked at.

Mr. Jons asked when the landscaping standards that we presently have were adopted. Mr. Osguthorpe said he doesn't know how long the current landscaping standards have been in place, but thinks they have been incrementally changed over time. Mr. Jons said he is interested in knowing how the present landscaping standards were developed.

Norman Cloud noted that the places that had good quality landscaping looked like it was designed to have that look. Staff made the statement that a lot of times landscaping is the last item finished when a development is completed, which means soil prep probably isn't being done and there isn't a plan for that landscaping to canopy. True landscaping is all about setting out a plan and then it takes about three to five years to come to fruition.

Mr. Osguthorpe said that is correct. Right now our landscaping is largely just the residue. It's what is left over on the site where a few trees might be put in without any consideration for how landscaping might be integral to the project design.

Mr. Cloud said the landscaping shown in the pictures taken at Jordan Creek and in Minnesota would not have looked like that the first year they were put in. Somebody spent a lot of time taking care of those initial plantings to bring them to the maturity shown in the pictures.

Elizabeth Beck spoke about the need for consequences for those businesses that installed landscaping that did not survive and requiring them to go back and make it right. She said this might be a really tough stand, but we are talking about quality of life and aesthetics and trying to draw people in. She recalled the site plans that were recently approved for the North Grand Mall. The City should have required them to show their landscaping design before their project was allowed to move forward.

Mr. Johnson said he thinks the new *normal* is that landscaping doesn't matter. If we suddenly demand a developer to provide something that the City has not been enforcing, it appears that

we are holding them to a different standard. Establishing a campaign will be saying to the developers that we are setting a new *normal*. We are going to partner with existing business to reset the standard, even if it's a minimum standard. Then as we go forward to change the standards, at least the minimum standards have been met and we can move the new standards forward.

Mr. Cloud said normally we call this non-conforming. He gave an example of non-conforming when a building front that is supposed to be of a certain texture and look is worn away and the property owner decides to tear it off and paint it instead of replacing it back to the way it is supposed to be.

Mr. Osguthorpe explained that there is a difference between legally non-conforming and illegal non-conformities. Illegal non-conformities happen when people are required to do something and then subsequently didn't maintain it or took it out altogether.

Mr. Cloud said the difference is there was a standard when the development occurred, which is very different than stating in the future we are going to have a greater amount of landscaping. But for that particular site they are not conforming to what they originally agreed to, which is independent for how we want to move forward with greater emphasis on planning for greater amounts of landscaping.

Mr. Johnson said it will be unpleasant if we come out with enforcement when we have never had enforcement. A campaign will emphasize that this is a partnership and that we are not picking on one particular business.

Mr. Stenberg said he agrees that we not initially begin with enforcement, but work together to develop a campaign for how to beautify our areas that might be easier for people to respond to and then build on that. It may put pressure on those other businesses to follow if a few businesses start doing something.

Mr. Osguthorpe said it just may need to come down to public awareness. People are becoming so used to what they are seeing that they don't realize what it could be until they see a contrast. They sort of lose sight that there is an issue and become numb to it.

Ms. Lee said a picture speaks a thousand words, which is why she suggested that it would be valuable for the Planning and Zoning Commission to see the presentation.

Mr. Johnson said landscaping seems to be treated as an afterthought and then as neglect from that point on.

Mr. Jons asked about the status of the businesses that will soon be under construction on the former bowling alley site on South Duff. Mr. Osguthorpe said we have received site plans and landscape plans that have been reviewed and approved for that site, which is the part of the process that we assure compliance. The difficulties occur after the fact if over time the landscaping is not maintained.

Mr. Jons asked if staff envisions that they would request a greater percentage of landscaping for developments in the future. Mr. Osguthorpe explained that he is putting together a workgroup of several people each with a different level of expertise to help staff study the existing landscaping standards. The Commission will be kept informed and have a chance to participate in this process.

Mr. Johnson said he likes that Steve has stated what the requirements are and what the reality is. The bigger question now is, are we happy with the way things look and how can we get to where we need to be.

Ms. Lee said she is pleased that this item falls under areas of the code that might be barriers to better sustainability, which is one of the items the Commission looked at during its discussion on priorities. She said she is also pleased to see that the City Council also seems to be using this project as an opportunity to look at the regulations. Mr. Osguthorpe said this could be an exciting opportunity to address things like green infrastructure, which a lot of the sustainable conscious communities are implementing in some very innovative ways.

Ms. Beck said landscaping standards also enhances the quality of life with bike paths, people walking, coming to an area, and connectivity. The pieces of a larger picture have been identified, but there is connectivity in a way to make this city more livable and a larger place between districts, which is part of what the landscaping standards are supposed to help do. It isn't just pavement or a dirt path between one place and another; there is some sort of a pattern and a plan. However, in order to get that and to maintain that, you have to include the enforcement and consequences that are appropriate and doable.

Mr. Osguthorpe mentioned the issue that came before the City Council dealing with an individual on enforcing landscaping. He said the individual was questioning why they were being required to do something that others all around them were not. He said this placed staff in a very difficult situation and it makes it difficult to move forward in a positive way.

Mr. Johnson said that is why we have to set the new normal. There are studies that show traffic slowing down in beautifully landscaped areas because people take into account the environment they are travelling through. It has the ability to lower stress. There are a lot of psychological things that occur with landscaping that sends a message of a safe, engaged community. He said his word for Ames is that we are heavily transactional; people are coming in to spend their dollar and then leaving.

Mr. Osguthorpe said that works well for what he calls impulse-type businesses where you are there for a reason and can quickly get in and out. But it is not as effective for a destination-type place where some of the big boys want to be. You will likely find the larger, more upscale department stores in an environment like Jordan Creek where there is high attention to detail. That is not to guarantee they will come, but it is easy to see that pattern where those kinds of developments are in locations where there is a higher aesthetic.

Mr. Johnson noted that we treat Main Street aesthetically different than South Duff, which is a choice that the City has made.

Mr. Cloud said we need to find a balance in trying to get people to consider spending a little more money on landscaping up front and then maintaining it.

Mr. Jons said he would like the committee to consider that there will be a point down the road that our design standards are going to be upgraded.

Mr. Osguthorpe said one of the tasks of the workgroup is to consider if we want to have different standards in different zones.

Ms. Beck said we are often dealing with large corporations where decisions are not locally made. If you have a Lowe's in one location looking different than a Lowe's in another location, it

would be interesting to see what the corporation has to say about the difference and mention to them that we would like the store in our location to look like the other.

Mr. Cloud said the goal is to have minimum standards and then make sure everybody adheres to those minimum standards, which is clearly not happening in many locations. It's not that we don't have minimum standards, it's that the minimum standards don't mean anything years later, which is the enforcement tool that the City needs to figure out.

Mr. Osguthorpe said he is pleased with the feedback he has received from the Commission tonight on this topic.

Ms. Beck summarized the points made during the discussion:

- That the minimum landscaping standards be maintained with the hope that the standards would increase in the future
- That a landscaping workgroup is being formed to help staff study the existing standards
- That enforcement currently appears to be an issue and there needs to be a way to enforce the minimum standards with consequences if they are not met
- That there be a partnership in establishing and maintaining the standards
- That there be cooperation between City departments
- That the City should be one of the leaders in setting the standards

Mr. Johnson said the only word he heard tonight that he doesn't agree with is that the standards should be increased and would like to see the wording reflect that the standards be enhanced.

Ms. Beck said she thinks increased means more than enhanced.

COMMISSION COMMENTS: The Commission expressed its appreciation for the presentation on landscaping tonight; it was very informative and very well done.

STAFF COMMENTS: Staff reviewed the tentative agenda for the meeting of February 15, 2012. The Commission requested that since the only item on the February 15 agenda is a text amendment, that it be placed on an agenda when there are other items to consider. Therefore, the Planning and Zoning Commission meeting scheduled for February 15, 2012, is canceled.

With no further business coming before the Commission, the Chair declared the meeting adjourned at 8:20 p.m.

Elizabeth C. Beck, Chairperson
Planning & Zoning Commission

Cindy L. Hollar, Recording Secretary
Department of Planning & Housing