DATE: March 16, 2016

SUBJECT: Landscape Ordinance Revision Second Workshop

After review of the initial January 28, 2016 workshop comments staff has assessed a number of options and standards from other municipal ordinances, green building/sustainability ratings systems, and discussed development experiences with Confluence. Staff believes that we need to get the stakeholders sense on the general approach of the ordinance format as well as specific standards to move forward on a new ordinance. Enclosed for feedback are General Issues and a list of potential specific standards that could be incorporated into a future draft ordinance.

We have posted the comments from the initial outreach meeting on the Planning Division website at www.cityofames.org/planning under “What’s New”.

The second landscape ordinance update workshop is scheduled for Wednesday March 30th. The meeting will be held at 2pm at the Ames Public Library in the Danfoss Room. At this workshop we would like to walk through the general issues to help get a feel for the interest in each approach and how they may work for stakeholders and staff. We also seek feedback on ideas for specific standards that we have drafted, as well as ideas presented by others at the meeting. Ultimately this feedback will help shape a recommendation to the City Council on how to proceed with drafting an ordinance.

Staff intends for the City Council to review feedback from the workshop and options at its April 12th meeting. City Council will be asked to provide direction on the format of an ordinance and on general standards to be addressed in the revisions. Staff will then proceed with drafting an ordinance with specific language for review by stakeholders followed by a public hearing with the Planning and Zoning Commission and finally returning to the City Council for adoption of changes.

Please take the time to look at the information that has been enclosed and be prepared to discuss specifics with us at the March 30th Workshop. If you cannot attend please feel free to send us written comments that can be added to the feedback. We thank you for your time and participation in this effort to improve our overall landscape standards.

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General Issues

1. Flexibility vs Predictability- Staff believes that there are four main format styles for the new landscape ordinance that could address the issues identified for the update:

   A. Create a new process that allows greater flexibility through discretionary staff approval of the landscape layout and types of plantings. This would be a wide open approach that would largely look at landscape designs on a site-by-site basis, but allow complete flexibility for the Planning Director to approve a landscape design that meets basic design principles.

   B. Create a “points” based site development approach for layout, planting, soil management, sustainability, etc. A project would be required to achieve a predefined minimum level of points, but would be able to choose how landscaping is configured based upon the pre-established values for each choice. This approach would allow for some flexibility in what to prioritize on each site based on its attributes and the interests of the development. For example, use of bio retention cells would earn more points than planting of shrubs, use of larger trees would earn higher points than a smaller tree, conditioning soil would earn points, etc.

   C. Revise the landscape ordinance to include some discretionary allowances by staff. This option would provide prescriptive requirements defined by ordinance that are also balanced with some level of defined discretion for the Planning Director. This would be more flexible than current landscape standards with the intent to promote higher quality design and interest, while providing some flexibility to deal with site specific issues. Could be based on site percentages and planting requirements with more discretion on where and how it is planted.

   D. Modify the current prescriptive standards of the landscape ordinance to address concerns for improved aesthetics, adjustments for screening, diversity of plantings, and incorporating sustainability measures. This would create a very specific set of requirements that would govern most all aspects of landscape design with minimal room for discretion by the Planning Director. This would be the same process that currently applies to Site Development Plans, but with updated standards.
2. Currently, standards are nearly uniform for all types of uses related to parking lots. Similarly, apartments have the same front yard and foundation planting requirements across all zones. This approach does not deal with potential location or site size issues, but is predictable and treats all sites equal. Alternatively, categorization of landscaping could be done by applying standards to:

- Zone Districts
- Uses
- Site criteria based on size and layout

Staff generally believes that uniform expectations are probably the best approach for issues that are the same across all zoning district, e.g. parking configurations, buffering of residential, etc. If there was a strong interest in a different approach it could be explored.

3. One of City Council’s primary issues for the landscape ordinance update is to consider how standards for sustainability could be incorporated into parking requirements. A number of sustainability provisions can cross over between high quality landscaping and promoting environmental benefits. Examples include:

- Incorporating existing vegetation
- Planting of significant trees that will mature to a large status
- Diversity of Plantings
- Stormwater Design
- Shading/Heat Island Mitigation
- Maintenance Requirements
- Air Quality
- Soil Depth and Quality
- Garden and local food options
- Open space and recreation areas
- Reduced impervious surfaces

Staff believes these issues should be integrated into the standards based upon feedback about priorities and needs of the community. The question at this time is “Are there specific issues that are missing, could higher performance be incentivized, or should some issues become emphasized in landscape design?”
4. Allowing for site completion and building occupancy.

Currently, the City requires that building occupancy be tied to completion of site improvements and landscaping. It allows for the Planning Director to take financial security for planting of landscaping at a later date due to weather or timing issues for planting. However, frequently there are requests for occupancy without completed site improvements and temporary occupancy permits are requested.

Staff would like to consider changes to the Final and Temporary Occupancy process to ease site visits, issuance of permits, and general administration. The intent is not to allow for building occupancy without site improvements that are required, but to ease the compliance process.

- Require self-certification by property owner of installed plantings. No financial security required. Site inspection by staff to verify once certification has been received, if not complete as certified then property owner subject to citation.

- Use granting of an occupancy permit to trigger landscape compliance within 30 days. Site inspection by staff after 30 days, if not complete per the plan then property owner is subject to citation.

- Allow a temporary occupancy permit with no security for up to 30 days. If not completed within 30 days, extension automatically ends at the following May. Requires upfront payment of an extension fee based on value of work yet to be completed, no financial security required. Non-compliance prohibits renewal of occupancy and rental certificates. Fee is not returned upon completion.

- Maintain the current Temporary Occupancy process, increase the financial security requirement to 150% and allow for one short term extension with posting of financial security for longer term deferrals. Non-compliance triggers prohibits renewal of occupancy and rental certificates. Security returned upon satisfactory completion.
Draft Options for Changes to Standards

Pending the direction on the format of the landscape ordinance under the General Options, staff has begun to consider issues related to specific standards. The following is a list of specific standards that address issues pertinent to the update that staff believes can be incorporated into any update of the ordinance.

A. Allow for 17-foot parking stalls where planting area is enlarged to a minimum of 7 feet.
B. Allow for “reserved” parking areas to not be built until needed. Apply to industrial and potentially to commercial.
C. Allow for decorative grasses to be credited towards landscape requirements
D. Allow for stormwater treatment measures such as rain gardens, bio-retention cells, bio-swales as credit for certain landscaping requirements based on plant variety within the treatment measure.
E. Institute a plant diversity requirement to avoid monotonous and homogenous plantings.
F. Modify the apartment front yard planting requirement, spread planting across the site and create buffers for buildings as well as parking.
G. Add decorative landscape requirements along highways, including evergreen plantings for residential.
H. Add a percentage open space requirement to apartment development, currently 10% for FS-RM but none for RH.
I. Allow for “amenity space” or plazas as credit towards open space percentage requirements.
J. Include changes to the planting requirements to specify initial planting size rather than maturity level at three years. Likely require larger initial plantings.
K. Adding a soil conditioning/quality requirement in required landscape areas.

Other standards under consideration include:

- Variability in planting and clustering versus mandatory screening and planting on center.
  - based on percent of screened frontage
  - based upon creating focal points of interest
  - based upon desired plant diversity
- Consider overall landscape percentage for area between building and the street, in lieu of other parking standards
- Landscape based stormwater treatment measures for 30% of stormwater.
• Revised parking lot requirements to focus more on tree shading and coverage of impervious surfaces
• Changes to reduce rear lot line screening to similar industrial use or zoning.
• Planning Director has approval for flexibility in “Urban Areas” for alternative approaches in narrow areas.
• Consider adjustments to screening requirements based upon distance, parking or mechanical equipment.
• Requirement for landscape architect on larger sites.
• Incentives for certain landscape practices that could reduce other requirements.
• Allowance for reductions in parking lot perimeter landscaping or minor parking reductions for interconnected sites at side property lines.
• Reduce commercial parking spaces by up to 5% with corresponding increase in landscaping.
• Require tree protection for “significant trees,” based on age, size, type, etc.
• Use of art pieces as substitute for certain front yard landscaping areas.
• Higher level of defined materials and soil quality within required landscaping areas.
• Consider allowing for decorative elements as landscaping credit, e.g. trellis, green screens, cut stone.