



City of Tacoma
Planning and Development Services

**Agenda Item
D-3**

To: Planning Commission
From: Elliott Barnett, Planning Services Division
Subject: **Application #2014-10 – Urban Forestry Landscaping Code Update**
Meeting Date: November 20, 2013
Memo Date: November 13, 2013

At the Commission's next meeting on November 20th, staff will provide an overview of proposed Comprehensive Plan and landscaping code changes intended to implement the Urban Forest Policy Element. The presentation will summarize the relevant policy direction, objectives and approach of the current effort, and place it in context as one of several Urban Forestry implementation strategies. Additional ongoing strategies include education and outreach, technical support, leading by example on City projects and City open space management.

As the Commission is aware, the City's urban forest (which is broadly defined to include all trees and vegetation) has been the focus of extensive policy discussion and City Council direction over the past several years. In 2010, the Council adopted a new Urban Forest Policy Element, which increased the emphasis on the urban forest's function as part of streetscapes (complete streets), as an integral urban design and aesthetic consideration, and its environmental and green infrastructure benefits. The Element sets goals including the following:

- Achieve a 30% citywide tree canopy coverage by the year 2030;
- Incorporate flexible code approaches tailored to the needs of differing land uses;
- Seek opportunities to increase stormwater benefits through landscaping;
- Integrate public safety considerations into landscaping;
- Enhance the urban forest connection between natural areas and developed areas.

This code update went through a first phase review by the Planning Commission in 2011-2012, when community members and stakeholders expressed concerns about an initial proposal which included new planting requirements. In response, staff have been reevaluating the key objectives and meeting with stakeholders to discuss a landscaping code approach that meets goals including encouraging additional tree and vegetation planting; planting the "right tree in the right place"; and, increasing stormwater benefits, in balance with meeting the needs of different land uses and emphasizing incentives, flexibility, technical support and education.

At the November 20th meeting, staff will present an overview of proposed changes, and seek Commission direction for further outreach and refinement. Attached is a key issues analysis, which details the proposed scope of work, and a summary of the outreach approach. If you have any questions please contact me at 591-5389 or elliott.barnett@cityoftacoma.org.

Attachment

c: Peter Huffman, Interim Director

Urban Forestry Landscaping Code Amendments

Project Overview – Annual Amendments #2014-10

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SUMMARY:

As part of the 2014 Annual Amendments, the Planning Commission will consider amendments to the Comprehensive Plan and Land Use Regulatory Code to improve trees and landscaping related regulations, with a focus on achieving such policy intents as incentives, flexibility, quality, and tree health (right tree; right place; right caring).

Code update objectives

This scope of work is based on the previous (2011-2012) policy discussion on this topic, as well as subsequent analysis and stakeholder outreach. Through these efforts, several avenues emerged to enhance the code to better achieve urban forestry (and related) goals, while striking a balance with the needs of differing land uses and emphasizing incentives and flexibility as opposed to new requirements. The 2014 update is intended to make progress on the following objectives:

1. Encourage Planting More Trees (and other plants)
2. Plant Better Trees (variety, larger sizes, right tree right place)
3. Better Ensure the Health, Survival and Proper Maintenance of Trees
4. Encourage Tree Retention
5. Provide Flexibility while Still Achieving Goals of Requirements
6. Increase/Recognize Stormwater Benefits
7. Provide an Understandable and Predictable Approach

How does Tacoma's Landscaping Code work now?

The starting point is Tacoma's current landscaping code (TMC 13.06.502). The current requirements are intended to achieve multiple objectives, including environmental, stormwater, aesthetic, streetscape, neighborhood enhancement, and buffering between different land uses. Specifically, the Street Trees requirement promotes safe, comfortable and attractive streetscapes (Complete Streets); the Overall Site, Site Perimeter, Foundation and Front Yard requirements provide aesthetic benefits by softening the appearance of development sites and preventing unattractive "left-over space"; the Landscaping Buffer requirements screen residential areas from commercial, industrial or other dissimilar land uses; and, the Parking Lot landscaping requirements provide visual relief in large areas of pavement and screen pedestrian pathways. All requirements provide for a measure of stormwater, environmental, aesthetic and other urban forestry benefits as part of development activities.

One-family, two-family and three-family dwellings are exempt from landscaping requirements, and few requirements apply in industrial areas. In general, more requirements apply to multi-family, commercial and mixed-use projects. Requirements are typically numerical (such as 3 per 100 feet), and emphasize a standard planting distribution or rhythmic linear planting pattern. Code guidance on plant selection and maintenance is limited, but some issues are addressed (such as size at planting and minimum unpaved

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planting area for trees). The code provides a tree retention bonus option, but otherwise includes few incentives for innovative approaches. The code calls for native or climate-adapted plant selection, but makes no distinction based on tree size or classification (deciduous/coniferous).

Key code update strategies

The objectives listed above (environmental, stormwater, aesthetic, streetscape, neighborhood enhancement, and buffering) are all emphasized by the Urban Forest Policy Element, and will continue to be central to the code. The proposed changes are intended to make the code more effective in achieving those objectives, in the following ways:

1. Plant More

In recognition of the input from the 2011-2012 process, the emphasis this time is on incentives and flexibility, tree health, quality and care (see below). However, the following limited expansions of current landscaping requirements are proposed.

- Street Trees – Consider expanding requirements for Street Trees to the following situations:
 - Public or private construction of full roadway sections
 - Public or private construction of new, or replacement of more than 50%, sidewalks
 - Along key corridors in industrial areas (where they are currently not required)
- Parking Lot Landscaping – Consider standardizing parking lot landscaping requirements to include both interior and perimeter plantings in most districts. Currently the code distinguishes between Interior Parking Landscaping (which is currently required in most situations), and Perimeter Parking Landscaping (only required in X Districts currently).

2. Plant Better

These changes would seek to optimize the urban forestry benefits from landscaping by enhancing requirements related to plant selection, planting locations, spacing and installation.

- General landscaping
 - Native plant species selection encouraged
 - Required landscaping to be climate-adapted; invasive plants don't count toward requirements; noxious plants not allowed
 - Add specificity regarding Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) (vegetation height and visibility adjacent to pedestrian pathways)

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- Remove barriers for Low Impact Development (LID) stormwater approaches (for example, rain gardens would get flexibility on shrub and groundcover requirements)
- Follow adopted neighborhood, streetscape or area-specific design specifications
- Trees
 - Expanded focus on “right tree-right place” (e.g., ensure survival, avoid utilities)
 - Tree species size – create small, medium and large distinction (link to sliding scale for number required)
 - Promote tree longevity and health through tree trunk setback and unpaved areas requirements
 - Trees to be planted in the ground, where feasible
- Shrubs and groundcover
 - Turf lawn and mulch don’t count as ground cover
 - Add shrub variety requirement
 - Groundcover and shrubs must cover entire area within 3 years
- Technical support – the Urban Forest Manual would provide tree lists, planting guidance and other resources

3. Vegetation Health

These changes would seek to optimize the urban forestry benefits from required landscaping by expanding code provisions to better ensure the health, survival and proper maintenance of trees and other landscaping.

- Require Landscape Management Plans to ensure ongoing maintenance
- Require landscaping to be protected from damage
- Require an irrigation system (includes hand watering option)
- Pruning – don’t kill the tree & no topping allowed
- Clarify responsibilities on maintenance and replacement
- Clarify approach to alterations to existing landscaping (modifications meeting code requirements allowed without City review (unless reconfiguring or relocating); may not make a site nonconforming to landscaping requirements)
- Strengthen reference to Code Enforcement process
- Technical support – the Urban Forest Manual would provide maintenance, irrigation, pruning and other technical guidance

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4. Flexibility

These changes are intended to provide flexibility and promote design options, while still achieving the goals of landscaping requirements.

- Add flexibility for tree placement (e.g., allow planting in street medians)
- Sliding scale of number of required trees based on size (small, medium, large tree list)
- Indicate that limited flexibility may be authorized if intent met
- Add option to bond for vegetation during the summer months
- Add a fee in lieu option for sites where it is challenging to fully meet requirements
- Create a Landscaping Master Plan optional review process – allow larger sites or special purpose districts additional flexibility for on-site planting in exchange for meeting canopy goals elsewhere on the site/district (baseline requirements would need to be established)
- Additional flexibility available through incentives (see below)

5. Incentives

These changes are intended to promote desired features through incentives. A clear baseline would need to be established to insure a minimum amount of landscaping is provided at each development site. In addition, some incentives exist outside the Landscaping Code—providing additional desired features may help meet surface water requirements and/or reduce fees, and could help to avoid requirements to replace right-of-way pavement sections.

The code could provide a pick list of incentives to promote one or more desired features, as follows:

Desired features	Incentives/bonuses
Larger trees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sliding scale for tree requirements based on small, medium, large tree list
Tree retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Front and rear yard setback flexibility• Reduced planting quantities• Reduced planting area• Location flexibility – allow vegetation to be clustered more closely
Evergreens	
Green roofs	
Additional soil volume	
LID approaches (e.g., permeable pavement, rain gardens)	

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6. Provide an Understandable and Predictable Approach

These organizational changes are intended to make the landscaping code clear and easy to use.

- Reorganize the Landscaping Code for greater clarity, as follows:
 - Intent and Applicability
 - General landscaping section to cover Process, Plant Material Selection, Installation and Maintenance
 - Credits and Flexibility
 - Requirements by zoning district
- Improve consistency of exceptions (which currently vary slightly across zoning districts)
- Provide clear technical guidance through the Urban Forest Manual

Policy and Code Changes Proposed

The proposal would include changes to the following:

- Urban Forest Policy Element – refine “30 by 30” canopy goal
 - In connection with the proposal to add Landscape Master Plans, the Element discussion of canopy could be refined and canopy goals for specific land uses added
- Tacoma Municipal Code:
 - Landscaping Code – reorganize for greater clarity
 - Subdivision Code – clarify street trees required for new private roads
 - Residential Code – add setbacks flexibility for tree retention
 - Downtown Code – refer to General Landscaping Requirements
 - Definitions – add clarity to support this approach
- Urban Forest Manual – technical guidance and standards to support the code

Outreach and Collaboration

Staff will work with key stakeholders to refine this approach, including:

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| • Metro Parks Tacoma | • Tacoma School District |
| • Port of Tacoma | • Chamber of Commerce |
| • Master Builders Association | • Business Districts |
| • Association of General Contractors | • Neighborhood Councils |
| • Green Tacoma Partnership | • Sustainability Commission |