



Memorandum

Planning Division
Community & Economic Development Department

To: Historic Landmark Commission

From: Doug Dansie, Senior Planner

Date: December 4, 2014

Re: Briefing on Park Strip Text Amendment
Petition PLNPCM2014-00194

Purpose

The purpose of the briefing is to provide background to the Historic Landmark Commission regarding proposed amendments to the park strip ordinance and to provide an opportunity for Commission members to supply comments and direction to Planning Staff about proposed changes.

Background

As part of the water wise landscaping code adopted by the City in the spring of 2014; The City Council requested a review of the park strip portion of the landscape ordinance, specifically requesting that staff consider three things:

- 1) The height of plants allowed in the park strip,
- 2) Efforts to ensure viability of street trees in the park strip, and
- 3) Ongoing community outreach and information.

Item number 3 is not a legislative action and the Public Utilities Division has prepared several brochures and a website to answer many questions.

Items one and two directly affect the appearance of the public portions of the park strip and the staff is requesting input from the Landmark Commission as to how those changes may impact historic districts or sites.

- 1) The Council has asked to review the height limit of plants in the park strip. Presently the height limits for plants is 18 inches, however some larger plants are allowed as long as they do not create a visual barrier. The Council has received requests to allow for the growing of corn, sunflowers or similar tall plants in the park strip.
The original purpose for the height limit was safety; to allow visibility between the street and the

sidewalk. The heights have been kept low so that a small child may be seen from the street while walking or riding on the sidewalk (and vice versa). After reviewing the issue with other divisions, Staff is not recommending to the City Council to change that policy, since the original concerns remain valid and there are numerous other, more appropriate, places to grow taller plants. However, the ordinance is proposed to be slightly modified to allow for a small increase in height to accommodate drought tolerant species, such as gro-lo sumac, which are appropriate for the park strip, but will be approximately 20" tall at maturity.

As part of this discussion, there have also been issues raised regarding the appropriateness of other visual barriers or structures in the park strip. The park strip is primarily a public space devoted to pedestrian access and required utilities. Therefore, extraneous structures that hinder those activities and/or are more appropriately located on private property should be discouraged. Some structures, such as utility boxes, are necessary for the community and therefore must be accommodated on public property. Others, such as mail boxes, are necessary for the individual residence. Others, such as outdoor dining, tend to enliven the street and are semi-public in their use. However the City has seen an increase in requests for structures that are purely private in their use and create a visual barrier in their construction. For example: A typical raised planter box of 20 inches in height containing plants of 20 inches in height creates the larger visual barrier than a three foot tall hedge. Furthermore the wisdom of planting private food materials in a public area where chemicals, biological waste, or access cannot be monitored is questionable. At the present time, requests for such structures are not limited to the adjacent property owner. Other structures that do not serve a public purpose, are not necessary for the function of the adjacent property, or are better accommodated on private property (such as statuary, trellises, fencing, etc) are also discouraged. (The City allows public signage in the right-of-way but prohibits private signage)

Therefore the draft ordinance being prepared by staff suggest that extraneous structures, such as raised planting boxes, be only allowed if they cannot be accommodated on adjacent private property, are maintained by the adjacent property owner and their overall height, including plants, does not exceed the 20 inch height limit.

- 2) The present ordinance allows park strips less than 36 inches in width to be covered 100% by gravel mulch. Park strips larger than 36 Inches are only required to have 33% plant materials, and the remainder may be rocks or gravel. Unfortunately the experience since these regulation have been put into place has been that rocks and gravel in the park strip create heat islands, which stress the adjacent trees (rocks retain heat during the day and emit it into the evening). Organic mulches generally do not have the same consequences. Many people also assume that their trees do not need supplemental watering in the summer, causing many species to suffer and slowly decline. The proposed changes will restrict the use of gravel as mulch adjacent to street trees, unless an operable sprinkling system is installed to insure the health of the trees.

These are the primary issues and responses presently being considered by staff for the park strip ordinance: Any comments or direction from Landmark Commission Members regarding this topic are greatly appreciated.