



**STAFF REPORT**  
**9/2/2020**

**TO:** Planning Commission Chair and Commissioners  
**FROM:** Luis Lopez, Development Services Director  
**SUBJECT:** Landscaping Policies Discussion

---

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission consider the information in this staff report and further information to be provided during the hearing, and provide staff with preliminary guidance regarding landscaping and irrigation design policies.

**BACKGROUND:**

Recently, staff was alerted by the Mayor's office that new construction projects are installing "water efficient" landscaping that is sparse, and lacking greenery/groundcovers. It was suggested that the Planning Commission consider revisions to City policies regarding water-efficient landscaping in order to require more greenery.

**DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS:**

The City's Zoning Code regulates minimum landscaping design improvements for new construction in the following manner:

- 1) All setbacks (yards) that are not improved with parking lots or driveways should be landscaped.
- 2) All parking lots must have a minimum 15% of the parking area landscaped, and finger islands and end planters required along a row of parking.
- 3) Minimum perimeter planter areas of 10 feet required whenever commercial abuts residential zone, with specific shade tree requirements.
- 4) Minimum "street tree" requirements for parking lots and new commercial/industrial development.
- 5) Minimum perimeter planter areas of 24-inches or 36-inches required whenever driveways abut a property line.
- 6) New single family homes require 40% minimum planting area, and up to 50% in sod area within the required front yard. Minimum number of shrubs/trees and espalier required (See Attachment).
- 7) Maintenance of landscape areas and permanent underground irrigation required.

Some of the challenges with implementation of the above regulations have to do with poor design submittals during the plan check process, or (more typically) poor installation and maintenance of landscape improvements. However, the major problem is that new plantings take several years to mature and provide shade, and greenery, notwithstanding that plants grow very quickly during the summer months.

The Mayor recently expressed concern regarding the new Our Lady of Soledad Church property, and the new homes within Prado Pointe and Escondida Pointe (homes by D.R. Horton). The concern is that plants are sized very small, do not provide enough coverage, and lack in greenery due to the extensive use of decomposed granite “D.G. Fines” for erosion control. There is a perceived notion that the lack of greenery gives a stark appearance, and a monotone look to the City’s new developments. It was stated that new homeowners are quickly replacing the standard “drought tolerant” planting and putting in more greenery.

#### Regional Water Efficient Planting Policies:

In addition to the plant palette issues, the Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) and the Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD - the largest water agency and wholesale water agency for the region) have advocated for a “lush and efficient” planting palette for the region. Most cities served by CVWD have adopted these water-efficient plant palettes into their design policies. This means that we choose plants based on their low water consumption, and avoid certain (“tropical”) plant species that use more water or that require “spray head” irrigation. Other cities like Indio and the Desert Water Agency cities have their own guidelines, but they are similar to CVWD’s policies.

In addition to the above, the State of California has mandated “no sod with spray head irrigation” for new construction, except golf course country clubs or large HOA-maintained common areas. The City of City of Indian Wells has adopted ordinances mandating an extensive use of greenery with sod and more “tropical planting palettes” along all their major street corridors, despite the CVWD policies.

In order for the City of Coachella to use more “coastal” or “tropical” plant palettes (i.e., Canary Island Palm, Queen palm, Ficus nitida trees, Eucalyptus tree, Grevilia Oak tree, California fan palm, etc.) and encourage the extended use of sod and green groundcovers (i.e., English Ivy, Trailing Daisy, Boxwood Beauty, Bacharis) and green hedges (i.e., Pyracantha firethorn, Ficus benjamina), a change in city policies regarding plant irrigation may be required.

#### Recommendations:

Staff would like to get some input from the Planning Commission regarding the concerns expressed above, and we will invite the City’s Environmental Programs Coordinator to further add to this discussion regarding the State of California drought mandates that affected our direction in encouraging more water-efficient policies. Those include the avoidance of water runoff, and

requiring use of micro-spray, or special pop-up rotating spray irrigation heads for small sod (turf) areas. Staff could then recommend that the City Council hire a landscape architect or otherwise prepare new plant palette and irrigation guidelines for private development in the city's various zoning districts.

Attachment: Single Family Residential Landscaping Requirements