



# Commerce City

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Xeriscape Follow Up

### Summary and Background Information:

On July 10, 2023, staff debriefed Council on the Growing Water Smart Workshop and discussed the Water Smart Action Plan that City and SACWSD staff prepared during the workshop. After the presentation, Council approved a motion that sought to pause review and approval of all landscaping permits that pertain to xeriscaping for a period of 90-days until regulations could be established. A follow up discussion pertaining to xeriscaping regulations was scheduled for October 9, 2023, but the presentation was ultimately postponed until 2024 by Council's direction.

Since October, staff have conducted thorough research and worked diligently to prepare options for potential xeriscaping regulations for Commerce City. The key suggestions for regulating and promoting xeriscaping in the City that will be covered in the presentation include plant requirements, layout guidelines, irrigation standards, setting a process for inspections and approvals, and designing a xeriscape example garden on City-owned property.

Of note, the suggested changes would allow alternatives to traditional turf in low-use areas. Alternatives to turf would include native grasses, shrubs, and trees, all of which are suitable to Colorado's semi-arid climate and can be seen in the attached Approved Plant List for xeriscaping. The suggested changes also include expanding the areas that xeriscape principles can be used, such as medians, parking lot islands, and tree lawns. Greater flexibility in irrigation requirements would also be permitted, such as the installation of temporary irrigation for xeric landscapes, and the allowance of hand-watering.

There are a number of benefits to xeriscaping and turf conversion, primarily being water efficiency and financial benefits. According to the Colorado Water Conservation Board, a 500 square-foot turf conversion will save around 6,000 gallons of water per year, a realized savings of around \$150 annually when accounting for utilities and maintenance

savings. Xeriscaping can also benefit a home's property value, increasing it by as much as 15%.

Staff reached out to three review partners to solicit feedback on the potential expanded allowance of artificial turf: South Adams County Water and Sanitation District (SACWSD), South Adams County Fire Department (SACFD), and the Sonoran Institute. All three organizations were not in favor of the City allowing artificial turf, highlighting the following issues:

- SACWSD noted their concerns around potential increases in stormwater runoff and the leaching of microplastics into groundwater.
- SACFD was apprehensive towards residential artificial turf use due to its lack of fire-resistant properties and its impact on the defensible space of a home.
- The Sonoran Institute stated artificial turf can be beneficial in limited areas, such as playgrounds and pet relief areas. However, the Institute was not in favor of allowing artificial turf in residential lawns, mentioning reductions in groundwater recharge and increases in stormwater runoff as the primary factors.

Surrounding cities in the Metro Area have differing stances on artificial turf. For example, the cities of Parker, Littleton, Lakewood, and Erie prohibit the use of artificial turf in residential landscaping. Conversely, the cities of Aurora, Thornton, and Arvada allow residential artificial turf use with varying requirements, such as a limited percentage of the front yard, or in spaces that aren't visible to the public. If Council wishes to allow artificial turf, staff has developed Best Management Practices for its use within the City, using the aforementioned cities and other external resources. These BMPs include live plant requirements, buffers, and requirements on the types of artificial turf that can be used.

Also worth noting, on March 11, 2024, the Colorado State Legislature passed SB24-005, a bill that prohibits certain landscaping practices in an effort to conserve water. Beginning in 2026, the bill will prohibit local governments from allowing the installation, planting, or placement of nonfunctional turf, artificial turf, or invasive plant species on commercial, institutional, and industrial properties. The bill will also prohibit these practices on common interest community property, street right-of-ways, parking lots, medians, and transportation corridors.

Staff has several policy questions for Council that will finalize the direction taken to establish City-wide xeriscaping regulations. The policy questions for Council are as follows:

- Does Council support Code allowing the conversion of front yards and tree lawns to xeriscape?
- Does Council support a Code requirement for new development to include a certain percentage of xeriscaping?

- o Multi-family and commercial inclusion?
- Does Council wish to allow artificial turf for residential use?
  - o If yes, does Council accept the proposed Best Management Practices?
  - o If yes, should artificial turf only be allowed in certain areas of the yard?  
(i.e: back, side, front)
- Does Council support non-functional turf conversion of City-owned land utilizing grant funds until this can be budgeted for?

**Staff Responsible (Department Head):** Jim Tolbert; Assistant City Manager

**Staff Member Presenting:** Jenna Hahn; Executive Management Analyst

**Financial Impact:** N/A

**Funding Source:** N/A

**Staff Recommendation:** N/A

**Suggested Motion:** N/A