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REGION: County targets landscape water use

New development, some existing properties, would have to shave lawns

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Those lush, green lawns are going to get gradually smaller as a result of an ordinance introduced by Riverside County this week and similar measures being drafted by area cities.

The county ordinance, scheduled to be adopted Oct. 20, would require builders of housing tracts, shopping centers and business parks in unincorporated communities to design landscapes that use 30 percent less water than pleasantly soft but typically thirsty fescue grass. And they would have to install sophisticated sprinkler systems that measure and spray the precise amounts of water plants need after factoring in temperature, humidity and recent rainfall.

Over the next three months, cities are expected to follow suit and adopt ordinances with the same formula for landscaping new development.

Cities and counties throughout the state are under a mandate to adopt strict landscape standards by Jan. 1. It's all part of a move statewide toward greater restrictions on use as California grapples with how to save water in the face of unrelenting drought and court-ordered limits on pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

"We don't even call it conservation anymore," said John Rossi, general manager for Western Municipal Water District and chairman of the Riverside County Water Task Force. "The buzzword now is water-use efficiency."

Water managers say people generally are doing a good job conserving, and are increasingly emphasizing that the significant savings going forward will be realized by residents and businesses replacing their landscaping with low-water-use trees, shrubs, flowers and lawns.

Riverside County previously adopted a similar ordinance in December 2006, limiting water use in new development to 80 percent of the amount required for lawns. But the mandate is triggering a tightening of that limit, said Damian Meins, the county's assistant planning director.

"We are starting to apply this to existing development," Meins said. "Up to this point, ordinance 859 has only talked about brand new development."

Under the new ordinance, numbered 859.2, residential, commercial and industrial property owners who take out county permits for renovation projects and propose changing more than 2,500 square feet of landscaping will be held to the new standard, Meins said.

Like home improvements required to bring structures up to current building and fire codes, such a project would trigger the need to, in essence, bring a landscape up to code, he said.

However, Meins said the county's proposed landscape code would not ban lawns or thirsty trees and shrubs.

"What this does is set up a water budget," he said. "You can put water-hungry plants in and plant fewer of them, or you can put drought-tolerant plants in and plant a lot of them."

It's just that the water budget for a landscape could not exceed 70 percent of the amount that would be required if the entire irrigated area were grass.

While the ordinance targets existing homes and businesses for the first time, homeowners need not worry about having to abruptly change their lifestyles. Meins said homeowners will be able to continue to make incremental changes to landscapes without being held to the new standard ---- and having to rip out grass.

"If you do something in your backyard, if you put in a tree, if you put in a planter, a permit isn't going to be required," he said.

And if you buy a foreclosed home and the landscaping is dead, you won't be held to the new standard when you replace it, he said.

The county measure, and the city measures in the making, are patterned after a model ordinance developed over the summer by the water task force and endorsed by the Western Riverside Council of Governments.

Tim Barr, water use efficiency manager for Western Municipal Water District, said the model makes an exception to the low-water mark for agriculture, schools and parks. Barr said those entities can use up to the amount of water that would be required if 100 percent of their landscapes

were turf.

But he said the model ordinance does not make an exception for golf courses. Rather, they are held to the same 70 percent requirement being assigned to homes and businesses.

"No longer can we support wall-to-wall turf grass," Barr said, adding that there is no reason why "rough" areas off fairways can't be planted with low-water-use plants.

The move to less thirsty landscapes has the support of local home builders.

"We understand the water problems we have up and down the state," said Tommy Thompson, director of governmental affairs for the Riverside County Chapter of the Building Industry Association. "We've got a water shortage and we've got to respond to that."

Thompson said builders aren't worried that landscapes with less turf will turn buyers off. If anything, he said, the trend will spur more sales as buyers look for landscapes that require less maintenance and keep water bills affordable.

"It's not a desert landscape," he said. "It's beautiful. There's flowers, there's color, there's green. Aesthetically it looks good. And there is some allowance for turf, just not as much as before."

Task force members developed the model in response to the 2006 state law, Assembly Bill 1881, that mandated the landscaping requirements. The idea was to come up with something tailored to area needs so cities don't have to write complex measures of their own or adopt a state model ordinance that doesn't take into account local nuances.

For example, the local model recognizes that in most cases, water districts rather than cities provide water, said Kristi Lovelady, principal planner for the county and managing director for the Riverside County Water Task Force.

Barr said the task force wasn't trying to take away lawns. But he said there is a growing expectation that turf should be functional, rather than ornamental, confined to areas where children play and dogs run.

"Very few people play, sun bathe and barbecue in the front yard these days," Barr said.

For more information on the county's existing requirements, and a list of plants and their water-use requirements, visit http://www.rctlma.org/planning/content/devproc/landscpe/landscape.html

The text of the new county ordinance can be viewed here: http://www.clerkoftheboard.co.riverside.ca.us/agendas/2009/09_29_2009/03.80.pdf

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