



Board Summary Report

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Agenda Date: 7/30/2024

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To: Board of County Commissioners

Through: Patrick O’Neill, Director, Facilities and Fleet Management

Prepared By:

Lisa VanderHeyden, Senior Project Manager - Project Operations, Facilities and Fleet Management

Presenter: Lisa VanderHeyden, Senior Project Manager, and Dawn Smith, Energy Program Manager, Facilities and Fleet Management

Subject:

3:15 PM *Administration Building East Lawn Water Conservation Project Opportunity

Purpose and Request:

This drop-in was scheduled to request authorization to pilot a new type of low-water ground cover on the east turf area of the Administration Building.

Background and Discussion: In 2021 the Board of County Commissioners approved the conversion of the west turf area at the Administration Facility from Kentucky bluegrass to a non-irrigated native. The project, funded in part by Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) grant funds and highly publicized by Denver Water, not only exceeded the target irrigation reduction of 1.5 million gallons per year, but also became a demonstration of large area site conversion and of the County’s commitment to conserving limited resources. The site is settling in very much as expected and the savings in maintenance labor and irrigation water are expected to continue. The project team had indicated at the time of approval of the 2021 project that we anticipated proposing a different measure for water conservation at the east side of the facility, and we have been developing options for the measure to apply at this site. Building on the successful partnership from that 2021 project, Denver Water has connected the County with a collaborative offering a unique opportunity to pilot a new site transformation called “Flower Lawn”.

Flower Lawn is a *no disturb* landscape transformation that is designed to self-perpetuate and to naturally transform the soil in such a way that it encourages healthy biodiversity while naturally controlling invasive

species. After site preparation, the perennial seed mix is broadcast over the existing lawn, established through irrigation over a period of 6-8 weeks, then irrigated only one time weekly during the irrigation season. With the exception of recommended mowing at sidewalks and driveways to convey managed landscape (a practice the County could elect to discontinue as people become more familiar with the naturalized appearance and once permanent signage is installed to explain the choice), mowing is expected take place at County discretion only when the plantings are 8" tall or taller. *No applications of fertilizer or herbicides* are called for. Unlike the new native area at the west side of the facility, this seed mix benefits from interaction with humans and animals. In fact a requirement for participating in the pilot is that we hold two community events in the seeded area in the year following seeding. At County option, we can maintain mown paths through the lawn or allow paths to form organically through usage. It is important to note that this would truly be a pilot - the seed mix has not been tested in Colorado, though it does contain many Colorado native species.

Given the condition of the site and the need to re-establish ground cover at the site (with or without the pilot), paired with financial incentives available, we ask that the County authorize participation in this pilot to test a potentially transformational solution for the site at extremely low cost, permanently reduce irrigation and site maintenance costs, and further County's commitment to modeling permanent solutions to the need to reduce our use of a scarce resource. Given the poor condition of the site and the ongoing struggles to maintain the turf grass due to water restrictions, this seems an extremely low risk recommendation. Should the County elect to later remove the Flower Lawn and replace it with some other ground cover, the costs would be much the same as if the Flower Lawn had never been planted, but the soils on the site will be improved and better able to support another planted solution.

As with the native seed project on the west side of the facility, this project would be expected to be highly publicized, very likely well beyond Arapahoe County borders. Denver Water and the Colorado Water Conservation Board have high interest in this potential solution, and the fast-growing Native Grass stakeholder community will provide opportunity for sharing about the outcomes. The requirement to host two community events in the lawn provides additional opportunity to publicize and allow interaction with the site. At least one of those could be a planned tour for the Native Grass working group, which has not yet seen this product in action. Dawn and Lisa have already been accepted as speakers at International Facility Management Association's World Workplace global conference in October (to share the value of small measures to save big on resource usage) and will be able to share early results from this project there as well.

Fiscal Impact: IMPLEMENTATION COSTS: This project would be funded through a combination of resources: The collaborative offering the pilot project will provide the seed plus design/consulting regarding any required irrigation or site modifications as well as ongoing consulting, staff training and evaluation/measurement of the outcomes. The estimated market value of the products and services to be provided is \$67,300. In 2023 the County dedicated \$70,000 + in-kind staff resources as matching funds for a \$121,000 CWCB grant awarded for permanent reduction of irrigation across four sites, including the east side of the Administration facility.

A portion of those funds and resources will be dedicated to this project. Denver Water has indicated the availability of up to \$65,340 to cover up to 50% of the cost of permanent removal of turf and has indicated acceptance of this unique solution to apply to the grant. Because this opportunity is very recent and requires

prompt action to implement in this landscape year the full financial details cannot be presented at this time. However, NO new County funding is sought for the implementation of the project.

ONGOING COST REDUCTIONS: Beginning in 2025, irrigation at the east side of the Administration facility would be expected to permanently decrease by a minimum of 50%, estimated at no less than Eight Thousand Dollars (\$8,000) annually at today's rates). Additional permanent savings are anticipated through the significant decrease in the need for site mowing, application of fertilizers and herbicides.

Alternatives: If this pilot is not approved, we request authorization to transform the east turf area to a short native mix of buffalograss and blue gramma, intended to be watered one time per week. The initial cost may be higher depending on whether we elect to overseed or to remove the existing turf, but maintenance and irrigation for this mix would be approximately the same as that proposed for the Flower Lawn. In this instance the County would not experience a reduction in the application of fertilizers and herbicides on the site.

Alignment with Strategic Plan:

- Be fiscally sustainable
- Provide essential and mandated service
- Be community focused

Staff Recommendation: Staff recommends approval of the request to pilot Flower Lawn as a replacement of the turf areas at the east side of the Administration facility using existing funds reserved for permanent water conservation measures and available grants.

Concurrence: Leadership of Facilities Maintenance has reviewed this proposal and its potential impacts on the operations and maintenance of the site and concurs with the recommendation.