

Naperville Area Homeowners Confederation

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Date: April 3, 2016

To: Mayor Steve Chirico

From: Bob Fischer, President, on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Naperville Area Homeowners Confederation

Subject: Residential Curb Appeal and Property Maintenance in our Neighborhoods

Mayor Chirico,

Thank you for allowing the Confederation to weigh in on this important issue in our community. As part of our review we have discussed both the resident's letter to you and the overall issues associated with maintaining the appearance of our homes, and, by extension our neighborhoods, across several venues including:

- At meetings of our Board of Directors;
- At our March 19th General Membership meeting;
- And a meeting between the initiating resident, Becky Cox, myself, and NAHC Board member (and certified arborist) Skeet.

While we concur with some of the concerns expressed by the resident about properties within our community that could benefit from exterior landscaping updating and maintenance, we differ on the best way to get the message out to accomplish this task. While we agree that homeowners could benefit from both suggestions, and, in some cases, concentrated work efforts to improve their property appearance, we do not see the creation of municipal guidelines similar to the earlier "Community First" initiative or the establishment of a new ad hoc task force as the most effective uses of local government resources to accomplish this task. Our rationale for this position rests on several factors including:

- Community First included a "trigger event" (a property owner seeking a building permit) which made receptiveness to the concepts more amenable. In our meeting with the resident she admitted, when we talked about local outreach, that the people most in need of the suggestions may be the least open to seeking or implementing them.
- Landscaping is very much a matter of personal taste. One person's perception of an overgrown "jungle" may be another's natural sanctuary for wildlife and native plantings.
- Different architectural styles, as well as differences in personal taste and the willingness and ability to incorporate already existing property features, makes every opportunity somewhat unique. We do not see the creation of a guidebook as the best way to deal with this uniqueness. We also support, where neighbors concur, a desire for appearance diversity within our neighborhoods.
- The physical abilities and capabilities of property owners to accomplish do-it-yourself work tasks vary greatly across the population.
- The economic circumstances of our neighbors also vary greatly. This directly impacts the ability of many, including fixed income seniors who have aged in their homes and whose landscaping has aged with them, to pay third parties for some of the efforts that may need to be undertaken to bring their properties up to what some may believe are "community standards."

We do believe, however, that other initiatives, including community education, can and should be implemented to assist in addressing the issues surrounding property maintenance, appearance, and curb appeal. These include:

- A forthcoming education initiative by the Community Associations Institute (CAI) targeted to its members (condo and other mandatory homeowner associations) on property appearance. NAHC Associate Director Jack Thew, who is the Secretary of the Illinois Chapter of CAI, advised us that CAI is developing an information series that will specifically deal with problems around maintaining aging landscaping and tree canopies. Local property owner associations are in a much better position to tailor “community standards” to their neighborhoods than a municipality. We will continue to monitor CAI’s efforts and encourage community association involvement in addressing curb appeal.
- The NAHC is considering the creation of a “green team” of local professionals, master gardeners, and others who would be available to present at local association and community group meetings on the importance of landscaping to property values and initiatives that can be undertaken. We are also planning to use one of our program year 2016-2017 meetings to specifically address homeowner landscape and exterior maintenance. While we recognize that people most in need of the information may not receive it, we feel that any and all economical efforts to spread the word through neighborhoods, by neighbors, are positives.
- City Code Enforcement could, particularly in the summer months when interns are available, transition from being primarily complaint driven to a more proactive approach particularly focusing on encroachments of trees and landscaping in the public right-of-way (streets and sidewalks). This will serve to address some of the issues of landscaping growing “out of control” while creating a safer environment for motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists.
- Publicizing the existing efforts of volunteer groups who can and do assist homeowners with landscape needs is important. One example is the twice a year Rotary Club of Naperville Sunrise “Clean Sweep” providing hands on cleaning, painting, repairs and general maintenance of a needy individual, family or community shelter in the Naperville area. By helping to publicize programs like this one, more worthy recipients can be identified and helped. Possibly the City website could be expanded to include links to these community focused organizational efforts. These “help” efforts could also be coordinated with the Townships as well as Naperville’s Senior Task Force.
- Re-instituting the second free annual brush collection. While the Spring collection is appreciated, many property owners do not fully recognize the extent of work that needs to be done until landscaping is in full “bloom” for the season, making a late summer collection cycle both helpful and beneficial.

As a homeowner who, even after recent investments of significant dollars in the upgrading of my 30 year old home’s landscaping, still feels some days like I am fighting a losing battle, I recognize the daunting task associated with improving curb appeal, but do not feel that another handbook or committee is the answer.

The Confederation remains willing and motivated to assist in efforts to improve neighborhood appearance and hopes that we can continue to work with the City to address this matter in a cost effective and resident friendly manner.

Bob

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