

SPOTLIGHT

Council could repeal native plant protections in St. Louis County as soon as next week

Kelsey Landis | Post-Dispatch

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CLAYTON — The St. Louis County Council could reverse a law **protecting native landscapes** as soon as Tuesday, and the proposal is drawing criticism from plant and wildlife advocates.

Republican Councilman Dennis Hancock, of Fenton, said county inspectors complained to him recently, saying the law — intended to protect environmentally beneficial gardens — stops them from mowing overgrown, neglected lawns full of weeds.

The county public works director said Hancock misunderstood the inspectors' complaints.

“The concern was related to the need for additional training on noxious and invasive plants, as opposed to problems with the enforcement of the existing ordinance,” Stephanie Leon Streeter wrote in a letter dated Tuesday asking Hancock to reconsider.

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And local conservationists said repealing the law, which permits “the planting and maintenance of planned natural landscaping,” is a step backward in supporting pollinators, sequestering carbon and managing water. Training is key to recognizing a native landscape, said Jean Ponzi, a manager for the EarthWays Center at the Missouri Botanical Garden.

“If you don't know what you're looking for, how can you evaluate an intentional landscape versus someone who just isn't keeping up their place?” said Ponzi, adding that she'd be happy to provide training to inspectors.

Hancock said he has received a couple calls per week since the beginning of spring from constituents complaining about their neighbors' overgrown yards. They're not native gardeners, just people who “don't want to cut the grass,” Hancock said. When homeowners complained to the county, code enforcers told them there was nothing they could do, Hancock said.

Terry and Sharon Ratliff are among homeowners who have complained to Hancock. The Ratliffs say their neighbor in their South County cul-de-sac lets his lawn grow uncontrolled for weeks at a time. The neighbor isn't using the native plant law as an excuse, and the county has forced him to mow. But they'd like to see the county regularly mow the neighbor's yard.

"Clearly, this guy is not going to do anything until he's forced to do it," said Terry Ratliff. "If there's something that prevents them from mowing it, then I'm all for changing that."

Last month, Hancock met with three county inspectors. They were unequivocal, Hancock said: Repealing the law would help them enforce weed ordinances.

"It was just a well-intentioned bill that maybe had unintended consequences," said Hancock, who voted for the law when it came before the council last year.

The County Council **passed the law** in May last year. It changed the county's noxious weed ordinance to allow for native plants that exceed the county's former 8-inch height allowance. The revised ordinance clarified that native, environmentally beneficial gardens are protected under county law.

It also preserved the county's ability to remove vegetation when it poses a public safety threat — such as if it juts out into a road or sidewalk — and if invasive plants or noxious weeds infiltrate a native garden. The law also mandates native gardens be at least five feet from a neighbor's property.

The law only applies in unincorporated St. Louis County, not in municipalities. Some communities here, including Creve Coeur and Kirkwood, already have similar ordinances.

Leon Streeter, the county public works director, said she wants to provide training to county inspectors on recognizing native landscapes.

"With sufficient training, it should be obvious when a property has a managed natural landscape with native grasses and flower broad leaf plants," Leon Streeter wrote in her letter to the council.

At Tuesday night's meeting, Hancock moved to advance the **bill that would repeal the law**. Democratic Councilwoman Lisa Clancy, of Maplewood, asked him to consider holding off.

"I would actually suggest we take (Leon Streeter) up on those offers to have some collaboration and conversations with the department before we move forward on this," said Clancy, who's part of Cool Cities STL, a group of elected officials advocating for environmentalism.

Democratic Councilwoman Shalonda Webb said she has heard complaints from constituents about overgrown lawns in her North County district.

"Someone in my community asked, 'How come you all can't just cut it down?'" Webb said. "This legislation prevents them from being able to just cut it down."

Only Clancy voted against advancing the bill. It could come up for a final vote as soon as Tuesday.

Jamie Hasemeier, a Webster Groves City Council member and chair of Cool Cities STL, said she hopes Hancock reconsiders before the next meeting.

“It feels like throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” Hasemeier said. “Let’s iron out the wrinkles that are perhaps making people upset, or where there’s a lack of understanding.”

Hancock said Wednesday he would consider other ideas if any come forward, such as tweaking the law to empower the county to deal with nuisance yards.

“But I haven’t heard that yet,” Hancock said.



Ned Siegel is utilizing knowledge of native and non-native plant species to support wildlife and insects in his own gardens. Video by Allie Schallert, aschallert@post-dispatch.com



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