

To : Merced City Council

May 29, 2018

From: Michael Belluomini

Ref: Replacing Lawns / Landscaping Median Islands

BACKGROUND In response to the drought, Governor Brown declared drought water conservation measures in 2015. The goal was to reduce water consumption waste while allowing necessary water use. The City of Merced reduced water use by 42%, thereby exceeding the state demand to reduce water use by 36% . The city adopted a water conservation ordinance following state guidelines in 2015. One of the state directives for water conservation is that median islands in the center of streets cannot be landscaped with a grass lawn. Median islands are permitted to be landscaped with trees, shrubs, and ground cover plants that are drought tolerant and need less water than a lawn. Generally median islands in Merced are not landscaped with lawns but with trees, shrubs, ground cover plants and decorative stones which meet state directives. "N" St. from 16th to 23rd St. and the corner of Yosemite Ave and "R" St. are exceptions. Medians there have dead lawns. Other median islands are bare dirt in large areas, such as along Olive Ave between "R" St. and "M" St. and Yosemite Ave between Redondo Ave and "R" St. There may be others.

THE ISSUE The character of a city, its lasting visual impression on residents and visitors, is substantially shaped by the appearance of its major streets. The major streets of Merced are the "living room" of the city. They reflect an attitude toward the parts of the city shared regularly by each of us. The legacy of generations of city leaders and builders is that Merced has major streets of outstanding attractiveness. This superior streetscape is a function of architectural design, aesthetically pleasing signage, and landscaping. The drought and other factors diminished the quality of the streetscape when many trees died. They are now being replaced. Similarly there are median islands that are now covered in dead grass because the city is not watering them in conformance with state drought water conservation directives. The state directives allow lawns as landscaping on the sides of the streets along the sidewalk. Other cities have replaced their median island lawns with drought tolerant water conserving trees, shrubs, and plant groundcovers in compliance with state directives.

THE PROPOSAL I recommend that the council direct staff to present alternative solutions to landscaping median islands with implementation strategies to the city council for consideration at the meeting of September 4, 2018.