



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: May 5, 2021

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**HOME IS WHERE THE HABITAT IS: FOSTERING BIODIVERSITY,
SUSTAINABILITY, AND EQUITY WITH NATIVE PLANT LANDSCAPING
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

San Diego County is the most biodiverse county in the United States and one of the most vulnerable to development, fire, and climate change. The struggle between conservation and development has produced decades of fierce conflict over land use in the region, pitting defenders of our dwindling, fragmented ecosystems against the inexorable advance of suburban sprawl. As urban development converts native ecosystems to office complexes and neighborhoods, residential and commercial landscaping has become a dominant feature of regional land use.

Dedicating a significant portion of these artificial landscapes to native plant habitat presents an extraordinary opportunity to obtain a wide range of natural, social, cultural, and economic benefits.

Native plant landscaping can provide numerous ecological benefits, including: 1) preserving regional biodiversity, especially rare and endangered species endemic to the region, 2) providing habitat for native animals, birds, and insects, 3) widening wildlife corridors and reducing habitat fragmentation, 4) inhibiting the establishment and spread of invasive plant species, and 5) reducing the introduction of plant pathogens on imported, non-native nursery stock.

For the San Diego region in particular, our mesa/canyon topography means that many of our yards and commercial and public landscapes share their borders with intact open spaces and wildlife corridors, thus greatly increasing the habitat services that native landscaping can provide to local wildlife.

Landscaping with bioregionally appropriate native plants can also increase drought tolerance, reduce water consumption, improve fire resistance and resilience, and buffer our green spaces against climate change. Furthermore, because native plants can reduce the consumption of carbon-

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intensive inputs like imported water and synthetic fertilizers, and increase carbon sequestration, native plant landscaping can contribute to the County's climate action strategy.

The unique maintenance requirements, specialty knowledge required to design gardens to function effectively as habitat, and higher cost of native container stock have traditionally been impediments to accessibility. Steadily increasing use of natives, however, has introduced economies of scale and reduced per unit production costs, and the internet has greatly facilitated the diffusion of knowledge and support networks. An effective native plant landscaping policy can send a clear signal to nurseries, landscape professionals, and consumers, which can further reduce costs and other barriers to entry.

A native plant landscaping policy designed around equity, adequately funded, and informed by indigenous knowledge and tradition can also make the landscaping industry more inclusive, more democratic, and more accessible to residents in historically underrepresented communities. While the cultivation, planting, and care of native plants involves specialized knowledge, training, and experience, an effective policy can provide support for the training and professional development of landscaping professionals and foster a strong market for local expertise and locally-produced nursery stock with relatively low barriers to entry and capital requirements.

An integrated native plant landscaping policy also offers substantial co-benefits to the children of our region: 1) providing opportunities for collaborations with local school districts to inculcate a deeper understanding of our climate, seasons, and ecology, and the ways that climate change is affecting their interconnections, 2) fostering a stewardship ethic, whereby children learn to respect and take responsibility for the well-being of their local environment, and 3) providing children with a sense of regional identity rooted in our uniquely rich native flora and fauna.

An effective native plant landscaping policy can also help to foster a unique, local landscaping aesthetic that is not only pleasing to residents, but distinctive and attractive to visitors.

The County of San Diego does not currently have any guidelines in place for bioregionally appropriate native plants for either public or private development. The San Diego Regional Biodiversity Working Group is a consortium of many of the region's foremost experts in landscape ecology, habitat conservation, and San Diego native plants, including representatives from the California Native Plant Society, San Diego Botanic Garden, and San Diego Canyonlands, with the expertise and knowledge of native plants to identify best practices and strategies for prioritizing native plants.

This letter therefore instructs the Chief Administrative Officer to collaborate with the San Diego Regional Biodiversity Working Group to develop options for a comprehensive Native Plant Landscaping Policy for both public and private landscaping, with guidelines, requirements, incentives, and equity-based resources and training, to circulate for stakeholder and public input, and to return to the board by year's end with options.

RECOMMENDATIONS
SUPERVISOR TERRA LAWSON-REMER AND CHAIR NATHAN FLETCHER

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1. Find that the proposed actions are exempt from CEQA per Section 15061(b)(3) of the CEQA Guidelines because the proposed actions do not commit the County to any definitive course of action and have no potential to result in either a direct physical change to the environment or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change to the environment. Subsequent actions would be reviewed pursuant to CEQA and presented to the Board for consideration prior to implementation.
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to collaborate with the San Diego Regional Biodiversity Working Group to develop a comprehensive Native Plant Landscaping Policy for both public and private property, including guidelines, reasonable requirements for County facilities and new developments with accommodations for recreational and other socially desirable uses, incentives for retrofits, and equity-based resources and training to ensure diverse participation among landscaping professionals and residents.
3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to engage with a diverse range of interested stakeholders and the public in the development of board options.
4. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to return to the Board by the end of 2021 with options for a new San Diego County Native Plant Landscaping Policy.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with these recommendations. The fiscal impacts associated with implementing the options for the San Diego County Native Plant Landscaping Policy will be presented to the Board by the end of 2021.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

With over 1,700 native plant species, San Diego County has the most native species of any county in the United States, and more native species than some states. Native plants have been used in San Diego's landscaping for decades and their use continues to grow as their virtues become increasingly appreciated and seeds and plants become more available and affordable.

The County stands at a crossroads in relation to landscaping, native plants, and our environment more broadly. Populations of pollinators like monarch butterflies are crashing, and new research indicates that songbirds are disappearing, in part because they can no longer find the insects they require to feed their young. The introduction and spread of exotic pathogens and invasive species—like Oleander Leaf Scorch, Myoporum Thrip, Polyphagous Shot Hole Borer, Kuroshio Shot Hole Borer, and Gold Spotted Oak Borer—pose significant threats to our native and non-native trees alike. With habitat loss, invasive plants and pathogens, and climate change critically endangering the viability of our native ecosystems, it is becoming increasingly clear that our communities need native plants to perform essential ecosystem services and that native plants need our communities to foster, promote, and protect them.

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San Diego County has recognized the importance of native plants, particularly from the perspective of water conservation and drought tolerance. The ‘Water Conservation in Landscaping’ Chapter of the San Diego County Code of Regulatory Ordinances (Title 8, Division 6, Chapter 7) establishes “protecting existing habitat and promoting the creation of new habitat” as a defined purpose of the ordinance, specifically in relation to water conservation. The County has also produced several guides for public use with native plant recommendations, including the Water Efficient Landscape Design Manual and the San Diego Sustainable Landscape Guidelines (in collaboration with the San Diego County Water Authority and other organizations). In general, these and similar County ordinances and materials have included native plants as an acceptable or desirable water efficient, drought-tolerant, or fire-resistant landscaping option among others.

We believe that the creation of a Native Plant Landscaping Policy will help County departments, residents, and developers to better integrate native plants into landscaping and other features.

An effective, equitable Native Plant Landscaping Policy will provide technical guidance and other incentives to county residents who are eager to participate in the installation, maintenance, and enjoyment of home habitat, but are otherwise unable to access that opportunity. It will likewise give landscaping and nursery professionals access to information and other resources that can improve their ability to propagate, install, and maintain native landscapes.

Building on previous native plant-related policy development by the County, including guidelines and plant lists, the County has the opportunity to collaborate with the San Diego Regional Biodiversity Working Group to create a groundbreaking plan to mandate, incentivize, and guide the conversion of hundreds of thousands of acres of public and private landscaping to functioning native habitat, much of it bordering intact open spaces and wildlife corridors.

The San Diego Regional Biodiversity Working Group is a diverse coalition of many of the region’s foremost experts in landscape ecology, habitat conservation, and San Diego native plants, professionals engaged directly in the installation and maintenance of landscaping, and knowledgeable representatives of communities likely to adopt native landscaping if given appropriate technical and/or financial assistance.

This letter therefore instructs the Chief Administrative Officer to collaborate with the San Diego Regional Biodiversity Working Group to develop options for a comprehensive Native Plant Landscaping Policy, with guidelines, requirements, incentives, and equity-based resources and training, to circulate for stakeholder and public input, and to return to the board by year’s end with options.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today’s proposed action to develop options for a comprehensive Native Plant Landscaping Policy supports the Sustainable Environments/Thriving Strategic Initiative in the 2021-2026 Strategic Plan by cultivating habitat, preserving sensitive species, democratizing participation in environmental stewardship, and creating opportunities for inclusive, sustainable, local economic activity.

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Respectfully submitted,



TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, 3rd District



CHAIR NATHAN FLETCHER
Supervisor, 4th District

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A

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AGENDA ITEM INFORMATION SHEET

REQUIRES FOUR VOTES: Yes No

WRITTEN DISCLOSURE PER COUNTY CHARTER SECTION 1000.1 REQUIRED

 Yes No

PREVIOUS RELEVANT BOARD ACTIONS:

N/A

BOARD POLICIES APPLICABLE:

‘Water Conservation in Landscaping’ Chapter of the San Diego County Code of Regulatory Ordinances (Title 8, Division 6, Chapter 7)

BOARD POLICY STATEMENTS:

N/A

MANDATORY COMPLIANCE:

N/A

ORACLE AWARD NUMBER(S) AND CONTRACT AND/OR REQUISITION NUMBER(S):

N/A

ORIGINATING DEPARTMENT: District 3 and 4, Board of Supervisors

OTHER CONCURRENCE(S): N/A

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