

New water restrictions in works

Cody Lyon

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Businesses are being asked to come up with new ways to conserve water, long term, to avoid stifling Stage Three water restrictions.

A Dec. 13 public workshop will kick off a months-long process that aims to revise current drought restriction language or code.

The drought has put commercial property owners in a pinch — limiting landscaping, devaluing property, putting buildings at risk of deterioration and hindering some development. And that’s under the current Stage Two water restrictions.

If Austin Water goes to Stage Three — which could happen by spring — even more drastic measures would be taken. Car washes would be limited to running five hours a day; property owners would not be able to use their sprinklers at all; and landscapers would be forced to resort to options that are drought-tolerant.

The city hopes business and civic leaders will help it come up with less drastic conservation measures to cope with a long-term drought; some are calling it “Stage 2.5.”

“We propose opening up the code, doing some housecleaning and perhaps putting in place some of the conservation measures [the Austin City Council] has recommended,” said Drema Gross, water conservation manager for the city of Austin.

The most significant of those would be mandatory irrigation audits for large commercial and multifamily properties, Austin Water spokeswoman Jill Mayfield said.

“It would be basically an assessment, making certain that large property owners are conserving,” Mayfield said.

Conservation is key. Under current code, when combined levels at lakes Travis and Buchanan reach 681,000 acre-square feet, the city manager would decide whether to implement Stage Three. But those restrictions were written for sudden disasters, such as a water treatment plant’s failure or some other immediate

threat. The mandates that come with Stage Three were never meant to last long-term.

“We’re looking at the entire code, and hope to get input on variances, landscaping and other issues, such as whether or not single-family home landscaping should be treated the same as commercial property,” Gross said.

Already, businesspeople are paying attention, and many are eager to share their ideas for the long term.

“Commercial property owners have a vested interest in professional landscaping maintenance,” said Jody McDaniel, manager of Greater Texas Landscapes Inc. and chairman of Building Owners and Managers Association-Austin’s water sustainability task force.

An owner’s inability to water landscaping could lead to a 20 percent drop in value, he said.

Developer Rance Clouse, president at Fortis Realty Services LLC, has already seen the impact of Stage Two. He’d been planning to use a new drought-friendly habiturf grass at his new Pease Place multifamily development in West Austin.

But, in order to get the plant to take hold, he would have to irrigate it intensely for three to four weeks, so mulch is his only option for the foreseeable future — and not an ideal one for builders trying to sell or lease properties.

He’s not alone. City officials have asked developers and contractors to delay planting until April, Big Red Dog Engineering President Will Schnier said. In the meantime, mulch and dirt will reign.

Land planner and landscape architect Mitchell Wright, president at Vista Planning and Design, suggested that Austin make better use of so-called gray water. A tremendous amount of water gets lost through showering, laundering, car washes and doing dishes. Such water re-use systems are expensive to install, however.

Water experts said now would be a good time to implement regional water conservation measures. There are dozens of cities, municipal utility districts and water supply corporations in Central Texas, and each has its own way of dealing with the drought. That creates an uneven playing field, economically.

“If three out of four cities have strict rules, it gives a leg up to cities that have the less restrictive policy,” said Tom Mason, a partner at law firm Graves Dougherty Heaton & Moody PC and the former director of the Lower Colorado River Authority, the entity that regulates much of the water flow in Central Texas.

The Dec. 13 public workshop to discuss new conservation measures will be from 7-8:30 p.m. in Room 104 of the Waller Creek Center, 625 E. 10th St.