City of Appleton Sustainability Advisory Panel
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TO: Parks and Recreation Committee

FROM: City of Appleton Sustainability Advisory Panel

DATE: 6/15/2026

RE: **Advisory Panel Support for Resolution #2-R-26, Vegetation Analysis and Data-Informed Mowing Reduction Strategy**

PURPOSE

The City of Appleton Sustainability Advisory Panel is providing this supplemental information in support of Resolution #2-R-26. The resolution supports completion of a citywide vegetation analysis and consideration of the results for vegetation-related work planning, maintenance operations, and management of City-owned lands.

The Panel supports this resolution because a vegetation analysis will provide baseline data needed to better understand existing conditions, identify future opportunities, prioritize work, evaluate potential vegetation and land management strategies, and document improvements over time.

This memo outlines the basis for the Panel's support, including the purpose of the vegetation analysis, potential benefits to the City, and implementation guardrails. This supplemental information is advisory and does not authorize immediate operational changes, direct staff to implement mowing reductions, create budget authority, or commit the City to any specific implementation action.

BACKGROUND

The Panel's Sustainable Ecosystems initiative is focused on supporting a healthy, safe, functional, and biologically diverse ecosystem throughout Appleton. This includes support for pollinators, birds, native plant communities, public lands, parks, stormwater areas, and other City-owned properties.

The current work plan for the Sustainable Ecosystems initiative identifies several related priorities, including inventorying current vegetative conditions, evaluating low-mow and no-mow opportunities, identifying native plants appropriate for Appleton, reviewing planting policies, and assessing herbicide and pesticide practices.

As part of this work, Panel members Ronald Jones and Andrew Gilsdorf are leading a vegetation analysis using their professional experience. The purpose of the analysis is to create a baseline understanding of existing vegetation conditions on City properties and to help identify areas where future recommendations may be appropriate.

WHY THE VEGETATION ANALYSIS IS IMPORTANT

A vegetation analysis provides a data-based foundation before future operational, maintenance, or policy recommendations are made. The City needs to understand current conditions before determining future direction. In other words, we need to know where we are before we can determine where we are going.

Rather than making broad assumptions about mowing reductions, naturalized areas, invasive species, or native plant opportunities, the analysis can help identify where changes may be feasible, where they may not be appropriate, and what maintenance, safety, budget, staffing, and public communication issues should be considered.

The analysis can also help the City prioritize future work. Some areas may be better suited for reduced mowing, native plantings, invasive species control, stormwater improvements, or habitat restoration than others. Having baseline data will allow the City to focus future efforts where they are most practical, measurable, and beneficial.

The vegetation analysis also creates a starting point for documenting improvements over time. If future projects are implemented, the City can use the baseline information to measure progress, track outcomes, evaluate maintenance impacts, and report on implementation metrics. This will help Council, committees, staff, and the public better understand what is working, what needs adjustment, and where future resources should be directed.

This approach allows the City to evaluate future opportunities in a measured and practical way.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

A data-informed vegetation strategy may provide several potential benefits to the City if future recommendations are found to be feasible and appropriate. These benefits should be evaluated through pilot projects, measurable outcomes, and normal City review processes before any permanent operational changes are made.

Potential benefits may include:

- **Improved operational efficiency:** Reduced mowing in suitable low-use areas may help reduce seasonal mowing demand, fuel use, mower hours, equipment wear, and long-term maintenance pressure. This is not intended to reduce full-time staff. It may help preserve staff capacity for higher-value work such as safety concerns, invasive species control, tree care, trails, stormwater areas, and general park stewardship.
- **Better use of maintenance resources:** The analysis can help identify where regular mowing is needed and where mowing provides limited public benefit. This can help staff focus time and resources on high-use areas, athletic fields, visibility zones, access routes, trails, and other public-use areas.
- **Safety and risk reduction:** Some areas are difficult or unsafe to mow, especially wet areas, slopes, and low-use locations. The analysis can help identify where reduced mowing may lower equipment risk, reduce erosion, and limit staff exposure to hazards. Areas needed for visibility, access, or public safety would continue to be maintained.
- **Ecological and habitat improvements:** The analysis may help identify opportunities to improve native plant communities, pollinator habitat, bird habitat, soil health, and overall ecosystem function. It may also help identify invasive species concerns and prioritize future management work.
- **Stormwater and soil benefits:** Naturalized vegetation and native plantings may improve infiltration, reduce runoff, stabilize soils, and support stormwater function where site conditions are appropriate.

- **Public education and stewardship:** Signage, maps, demonstration sites, and public education can help residents understand that naturalized areas are intentionally managed. The analysis may also create opportunities for neighborhood groups, corporate volunteers, and community partners to support future restoration and stewardship projects.
- **Better decision-making:** The vegetation analysis will give the City a stronger baseline for future policy, budget, maintenance, and land management discussions. It will help Council, committees, staff, and the public evaluate future recommendations based on data, site suitability, operational feasibility, and measurable outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION GUARDRAILS

Future mowing reduction or naturalized landscape recommendations should be considered only where they are safe, appropriate, compatible with public use, and operationally feasible.

High-use turf areas, athletic fields, visibility zones, access routes, trail edges, and safety-sensitive locations should continue to be maintained as needed.

Low-mow and no-mow areas should not be described as no-maintenance areas. Establishment, invasive species control, public communication, monitoring, and long-term maintenance may require additional work, especially in the early years.

Future recommendations should identify staffing, budget, equipment, public communication, maintenance, invasive species, and site-suitability considerations.

Volunteer efforts and community partnerships may support future projects, but they should not replace City review of safety, feasibility, maintenance expectations, or long-term operational impacts.

ADVISORY ROLE OF THE PANEL

The City of Appleton Sustainability Advisory Panel was created by Resolution #9-R-22 to serve as an advisory group to the Mayor, City Department Directors, and the Common Council. The Panel provides feedback and advice on matters related to sustainability, climate action, and resiliency.

The Panel may be asked to provide advisory input on active proposals as they are advanced and implemented by the City through legislation, policy changes, practices, budgeting processes, public outreach, education, and other related efforts. This may include review of plans, actions, policies, outcome measures, financial resources, and strategies that support sustainability and climate resilience.

Panel members serve in an advisory role only. The Panel does not direct staff operations, authorize implementation, create budget authority, or commit the City to any course of action or inaction. Any future implementation of recommendations related to mowing reduction, native plantings, invasive species management, or other land management strategies would need to proceed through the appropriate City staff review, administrative process, committee review, Council direction, and budget process.

The City's Project and Resiliency Manager serves as the staff liaison to the Panel, and requests to engage the Panel are made through that position.

CONNECTION TO EXISTING CITY EFFORTS

This work supports the City's broader sustainability and resiliency efforts by helping create a more data-informed approach to public land management. It also aligns with the City's ongoing Sustainability and Resiliency Master Plan process, which is intended to identify practical, measurable, and implementable strategies for long-term community resilience.

The vegetation analysis may also support Appleton's identity and ongoing work related to pollinator habitat, bird habitat, native vegetation, stormwater management, and responsible stewardship of public lands.

SUMMARY

The City of Appleton Sustainability Advisory Panel supports Resolution #2-R-26 because it advances completion of a citywide vegetation analysis and encourages future data-informed recommendations. The resolution does not authorize immediate operational changes or direct staff to reduce mowing.

The analysis is intended to help the City better understand existing vegetation conditions, identify future opportunities, prioritize vegetation-related work, evaluate potential recommendations, and document future progress through the appropriate City processes. This measured approach allows Council, committees, staff, and the public to consider future vegetation and land management strategies with better information, clearer expectations, measurable outcomes, and appropriate safeguards.

REFERENCES

- Resolution #9-R-22 Sustainability Resolution
- Resolution #2-R-26 Supporting Vegetation Analysis and Advancing a Data-Informed Mowing Reduction Strategy
- Appleton Sustainability Advisory Panel 2024 Work Plan
- Sustainable Ecosystems Initiative Interim Report
- Sustainability and Resiliency Master Plan process