MEMO

To: Sandy City Council

From: Council Member Sharkey

Re: Discussion and Consideration of Park Strips in Future Residential Development

Date: October 22, 2024

The Changing Landscape of Park Strips

We have a growing park strip problem in Sandy.

In recent years, park strips in residential areas have been undergoing noticeable change. Identified years ago as water wasters, and generally unused as front yard activity spaces, there has been a push to eliminate grass turf and sprinkler systems in park strips. Incentives to "flip your strip" have been offered, and the public has become aware that changing out park strips can be beneficial, especially as a water conservation measure.

Park strips come with an inherent list of challenges. These issues are the reason I propose that the city council give new attention to residential park strips, and to reconsider their value, purpose, and need. I'll guide the council through what I've learned from the experts over the years as I've been evaluating this topic.

Weeds, Weeds, More Weeds, and Non-Compliance

Many homeowners in Sandy have simply stopped watering their park strips resulting in a state of neglect. As vegetation has died, some have filled their park strips with rocks, which can become weed-filed rock gardens fairly quickly. Many are out of compliance with city standards for park strip landscaping and maintenance. Weedy park strips have become a top code enforcement complaint in Sandy.

While xeriscaping with drip irrigation is the preferred landscaping solution, many are not following that design approach. A xeriscaped park strip is often more labor intensive than mowing grass. Some xeriscaped strips look good for a couple years, only to begin to gradually suffer from neglect. In a handful of cases, xeriscaped park strips have been replaced with grass for its ease of maintenance. Filling a park strip with rock mulch alone is not compliant with city

landscape standards. Filling a park strip with bark mulch is not allowed. Both examples are often seen in our city, and the incidence is growing. Hotter terrains are a side effect.

Park Strip Trees and Sidewalks

Park strips often feature street trees which add to the list of challenges. While beneficial for cooling, aesthetically pleasing, and serving the purpose of shading the sidewalk for active transportation, street trees are ruinous to sidewalks, curbs, and gutters. In Sandy, we have an annual budget of $1.2M in sidewalk replacement. Of that amount, 70% is spent on replacing sections of sidewalk heaved up by street trees that have created a trip hazard. Street trees are such an expected hazard to sidewalks, that our code now calls for park strips to be 8' wide when a tree is to be installed (widened from the previous 5'). Widening unused spaces that are suffering from neglect seems like the wrong way to pivot.

In addition to creating sidewalk trip hazards, the deciduous trees used in park strips lose their leaves directly into the gutter and, as no one knows better than Sandy City, organic material in the gutter runs contrary to stormwater management goals and expectations.

Efficient Land Use

With the housing crisis prompting the construction of smaller homes on smaller lots, the efficient use of land is crucial. In the coming years, Governor Cox expects cities to build 35,000 starter homes, defined as small single family detached homes on 5,000 square foot lots.

As lots become smaller, effective use of land becomes important. Instead of dedicating valuable land area to park strips, the land could instead be used for larger front or back yards, modified setbacks, or slightly larger single-story home sizes (which is desirable in senior housing). At today's land costs, building park strips which are generally unused outdoor space, may not yield the best design and cost result.

The Bus Tour and a Solution to Consider

The bus tour showcases 6 stops featuring housing developments built largely or entirely without park strips. The configuration features curb-adjacent sidewalks, where there is a normal width street, gutter, curb, sidewalk, front yard, etc. The park strip is eliminated. We visited a small sampling of this type of design. There are many more examples in our city.

Park strips are currently required in our residential design standards, but they may be waived by the Planning Commission, as described in our code. When a waiver is allowed, the sidewalk is required to be 1' wider, and the street tree(s) is required to be "behind" the sidewalk, i.e., in the front yard. During the time I was a Planning Commissioner, we granted the request for a park strip waiver every time it was made, without debate and without dissent. Considering a

change to the code could be as simple as changing the language from park strips being "required" to "not required". That change would still allow park strips if a property owner or builder wanted them. If the council decided to take a more direct approach to prohibit or eliminate park strips going forward, they could still be allowed under a waiver – basically the reverse of the current land code requirement and process.

Summary (and Homework)

I've been exploring this idea for several years. My interest started as a water conservation measure. Then the scope broadened to include the ongoing city costs associated with park strips and street trees. Next, the biggest drought in recent history hit the state and homeowners stopped watering their park strips, triggering the loss of beauty of our residential streets, and increased code enforcement complaints. Most recently, the housing affordability crisis added a component to the park strip issue in the attainment of best use of small lot sizes.

It is not my intention to apply any code amendment retroactively to existing park strips. I'm only asking the council to evaluate the concept of eliminating the requirement for park strips in new residential developments going forward. Further, the concept would be applied to residential developments on local streets, not higher-speed roadways, or major city streets.

I'm happy to give the council, and the public, more time for thought and consideration. I've sought the opinion of more than 50 people while studying this concept including planners, engineers, consultants, home builders, utility companies, homeowners, elected officials, and more than 20 city employees from parks, community development, public works, public utilities, fire, and police. Many circled back afterward to tell me that they are now noticing park strips in a way they never had before. I'm asking you to do the same thing – *notice park strips*. Take a different route to work, school, home, city hall, shopping, and errands. Notice park strips in our city and others. Notice their condition. Also notice the use and appearance of curb-adjacent sidewalks. You may find them to be more common than you thought (most of the brand new Sego Lily streetscape through White City features curb-adjacent sidewalks, and much of Wasatch Blvd throughout Sandy too). Consider their potential benefits in regard to resourceful land use, and improved ability to keep our city beautiful and weed free.

Teaser for the Second Reading

What is the purpose of park strips? What happens when you don't have one? Which professional groups spoke in favor of park strips, which spoke against, and why? What did the homeowners have to say?