

City Council Meeting

April 21, 2026

- **CITY COUNCIL AGENDA ITEM : XX**
- **DISCUSSION OF REVISIONS TO CHAPTER 122, ARTICLE II, DIVISION 2, COMMERCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL VEGETATION BUFFERS**

DANA DETTMAR, NATURAL RESOURCES

INCORPORATED

1974

City staff have been working on a number of vegetation buffer projects for commercial/institutional properties post-hurricane and surge events. Several challenges have been identified when trying to achieve buffer compliance:

1. Lawfully existing non-conforming properties
2. Buffers with existing mature trees
3. Overhead powerlines, public utility easements, and stormwater within buffer areas
4. Cost of plants has increased significantly since Hurricane Ian

Since Hurricane Ian there have been several changes to code language regarding vegetation buffers to assist property owners/businesses with recovery:

Ordinance 24-003

- Created native plant incentive to allow reduction in required plant quantities by 15% when utilizing all native plants.
- Excluded square footage ingress-egress driveways and inter/intra connectivity paths from plant quantity calculations.
- Allowed buffer depths to be increased administratively to accommodate utilities rather. Previously, required Planning Commission approval.

Ordinance 24-018 & 25-022

- Allows waivers to buffer standards to be approved administratively until December 31, 2026. Previously, required Planning Commission approval.

Consideration of potential or recommended revisions to the vegetation buffer standards contained in Chapter 122 related to commercial and institutional uses. To include the following topics:

1. Plant quantities in front buffer
2. Land use adjacent to side & rear buffers for commercial/institutional properties
3. Buffers with existing mature trees
4. Powerlines and public utility easements within required buffer areas
5. Stormwater areas within required buffer areas
6. Phased installation of buffers
7. Compliance following natural disaster
8. Other?

Working group for the buffer revisions consisted of Natural Resources and Planning staff, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, & Coastal Vista Design.

1. Plant quantities in front buffer

Issue: Can we achieve the purpose of the front buffer with fewer plants?

Vegetation buffers are required “... as a means of providing a barrier to both light and sound created by such uses and for the purpose of maintaining a rural, natural environment and wildlife corridor along city streets.” (Sec. 122-47).

Current Requirements (Section 122-49): Types, varieties, and numbers of plants required.

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft	6 native species	27
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

1. Plant quantities in front buffer

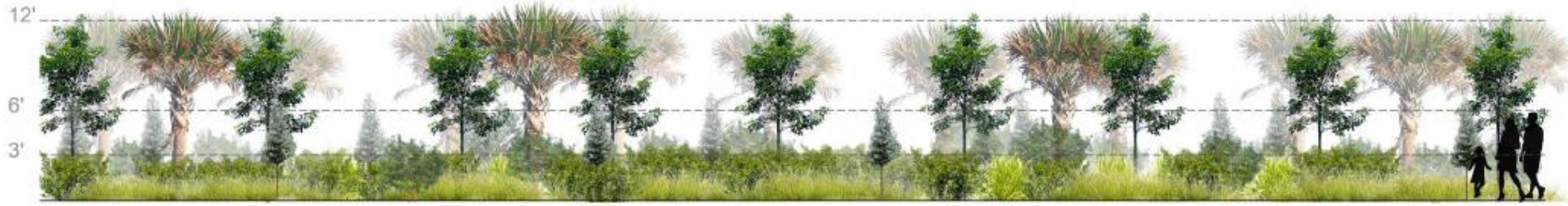
Recommended Revision: Reduce the large and medium tree requirement to 1 tree per 200 sq ft

Section 122-49(a)1-3

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft 1 per 200 sq ft	6 native species	27 10
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

Benefits/Rationale:

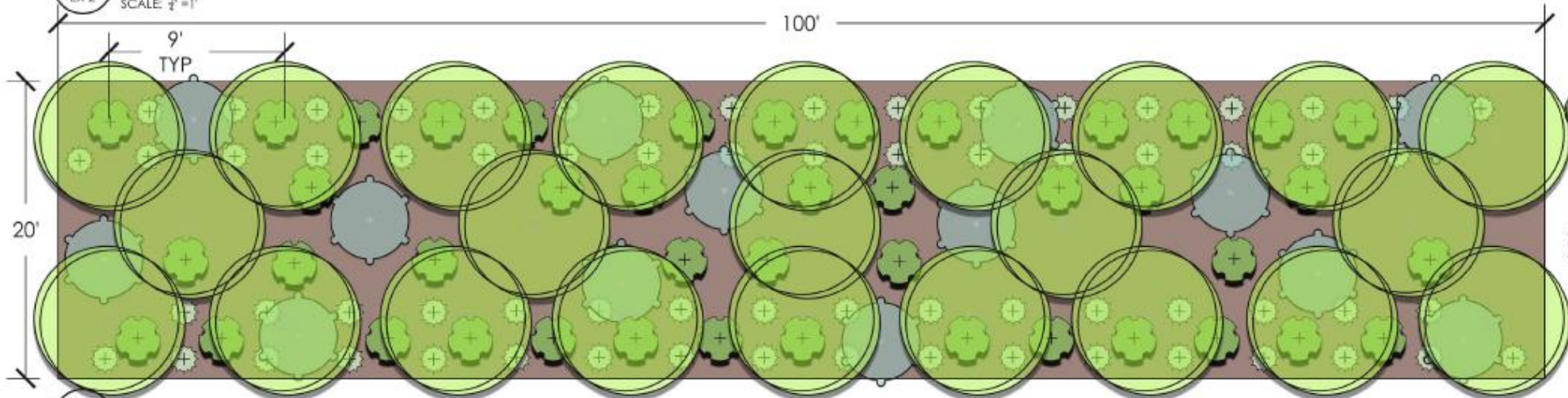
- Increase in sunlight availability to the lower canopy, increases options for plant palette
- Allows more space for tree growth, better growth form to increase resilience
- Lowers cost for property owners



2A BUFFER PLANTING ELEVATION 20' X 100' WITH 15% REDUCTION FOR 100% NATIVE BUFFER SECTION AT TIME OF PLANTING
EX-2 SCALE: 1/4" = 1'



2B BUFFER PLANTING ELEVATION 20' X 100' WITH 15% REDUCTION FOR 100% NATIVE BUFFER SECTION AFTER 2-3 YEARS
EX-2 SCALE: 1/4" = 1'



2C BUFFER PLANTING PLAN 20' X 100' WITH 15% REDUCTION FOR 100% NATIVE BUFFER PLAN
EX-2 SCALE: 1/4" = 1'

**Current standards
with 15% native
plant incentive**

PLANT MATERIAL SELECTION SAMPLE:
Large / Medium Tree Category - minimum of 4 Sanibel native species

2000 SF / 75 = 27 X .85 = 23 Large/medium Tree required (reduction= free 85%)
Sample trees: Cabbage Palm (*Sabal palmetto*), Green Buttonwood (*Conocarpus wrightii*), Gumbo Limbo (*Bursera simarouba*), Pink Apple (*Clusia rosea*), Live Oak (*Quercus virginiana*)
MIN SIZE 10'-12' HT, 2" CAL

Small Tree/Large Shrub - minimum of 6 Sanibel native species

2000 SF +/- 30 = 67 X .85 = 57 Small Tree/shrub Required (reduction= 15% off)
10' x .25 = 14 SMALL TREES REQUIRED
Sample shrubs: Key Wych Palm, (*Thrinax morrisii*), Silver Buttonwood (*Conocarpus wrightii*), Dahoon Holly (*Ilex cassine*), Bahama Cassia (*Bassia maritima* var. *shapamii*), Coco Plum (*Chrysobalanus icaya*), Simpson Shapper / Twilberry (*Myrsine floridana*), Myrtle (*Myrsine floridana*)
75% MIN SIZE 7' GAL, 25% MIN SIZE 6" HT

Small Shrub/Groundcover - minimum of 3 Sanibel native species

2000 SF +/- 25 = 80 X .85 = 68 Small Shrub/groundcover Required (reduction= 15% off)
Sample: Groundcover: Small Leaf Wild Coffee (*Psychotria agatheloba*), Florida Coccoloba (*Zamia pumila*), Spider Lily (*Thymocallis trifida*), Muriel Grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*), Golden Creeper (*Bonania thaxtii*), American Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), Peperomia (*Peperomia alata*), Quality (*Chococypselum bicolorum*), Wild Coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), Spartina (*Spartina bakeri*)

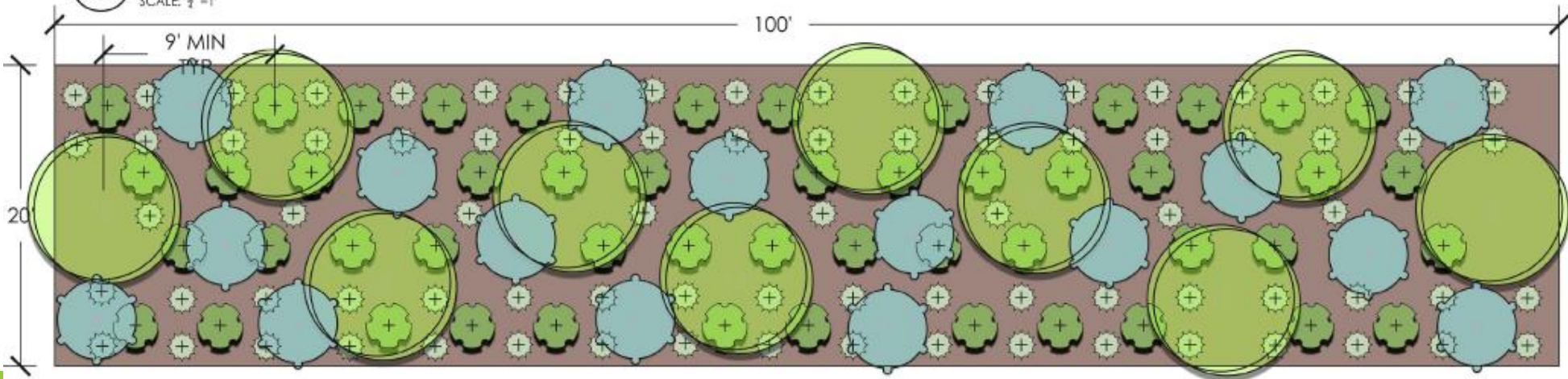


3A BUFFER ELEVATION 20' X 100' REDUCED LARGE TREE DENSITY (1 TREE / 200 SF) AT TIME OF PLANTING
 EX-3 SCALE: 1/4" = 1'

Proposed standards with reduced tree density (1/200 sqft)



3B BUFFER ELEVATION 20' X 100' REDUCED LARGE TREE DENSITY (1 TREE / 200 SF) AFTER 2-3 YEARS
 EX-3 SCALE: 1/4" = 1'



3C BUFFER PLAN 20' X 100' REDUCED LARGE TREE DENSITY (1 TREE / 200 SF)
 EX-3 SCALE: 1/4" = 1'

- PLANT MATERIAL SELECTION SAMPLE:**
- Large / Medium Tree Category - minimum of 6 Sanibel native species**
 - 2000 SF / 200 = 10 Large/medium Tree required**
 - Sample trees: Cabbage Palm (*Roystonea palmata*), Green Burfordwood (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), Gumbo Limbo (*Bursera americana*), Peach Apple (*Clusia rosea*), Live Oak (*Quercus virginiana*)
 MIN SIZE 10'-12' HT, 2" CAL
 - Small Tree/Large Shrub - minimum of 6 Sanibel native species**
 - 2000 SF - 30 = 67 Small Tree/shrub Required**
***67 x .25 = 17 SMALL TREES REQUIRED**
 - Sample plants: Key Starbush Palm (*Thrinax parviflora*), Silver Burfordwood (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), Dahoon Holly (*Ilex cassine*), Bahama Cassia (*Senna mexicana* var. *champani*), Coco Plum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*), Simpson Stopper / Twinkberry (*Myrsine floridana*), Myrtle (*Rapanea punctata*)
 75% MIN SIZE 7 GAL, 25% MIN SIZE 4" HT
 - Small Shrub/Groundcover - minimum of 3 Sanibel Native species**
 - 2000 SF - 25 = 80 Small Shrub/groundcover Required**
 - Sample Groundcovers: Short leaf Wild Coffee (*Psychotria ligularia*), Florida Coriaria (*Zamia pumila*), Spider Lily (*Hymenocallis latifolia*), Milky Grass (*Nasumburgia capillaris*), Golden Creeper (*Bonania thymifolia*), American Bayberry (*Colicarpa americana*), Paperaria (*Paperaria alata*), Quailberry (*Crotopetalum filiforme*), Wild Coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), Spargina (*Spargina bakeri*)
 MIN SIZE 1 GAL

2. Adjacent land use for side & rear buffers

Issue: Should the side and rear buffer standards take into consideration the adjacent land use?

1. **Another commercial property**
2. **Residential property**
3. **Conservation lands**

Current Requirements: Section 122-50(4) requires that a vegetation buffer between a commercial building or parking or loading area and any dwelling unit be *“sufficiently dense, between (2) feet and 6 feet above ground level, as to screen light and sound passage to the extent reasonably practical. As a minimum, all required small trees and shrubs in such portions of a buffer must be at least 6 feet in height...”* at the time of CO.

Other types of adjacent land uses are not considered.

2. Adjacent land use for side & rear buffers

Side & rear commercial/institutional buffers located adjacent to:

Another Commercial Property

Current Requirements

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft	6 native species	27
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% small trees = 17
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

2. Adjacent land use for side & rear buffers

Side & rear commercial/institutional buffers located adjacent to:

Another Commercial Property

Recommended Revisions

- 1 large/medium tree per 300 sq ft
- Eliminate requirement that 25% of small tree/medium shrub category be small trees

Section 122-29(b)(1)a-c

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft 1 per 300 sq ft	6 native species	27 7
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% small trees = 17
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

2. Adjacent land use for side & rear buffers

Side & rear commercial/institutional buffers located adjacent to:

Residential property

Current Requirements

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft	6 native species	27
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

2. Adjacent land use for side & rear buffers

Side & rear commercial/institutional buffers located adjacent to:

Residential property

Recommended Revision

Keep the same standards as proposed changes to the front buffer to ensure a more robust visual/sound barrier between commercial/institutional and residential areas.

Section 122-49(a)1-3

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft 1 per 200 sq ft	6 native species	27 10
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

2. Adjacent land use for side & rear buffers

Side & rear commercial/institutional buffers located adjacent to:

Conservation lands

Current Requirements

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2. Adjacent land use for side & rear buffers

Side & rear commercial/institutional buffers located adjacent to:

Conservation lands

Recommended Revisions

- Require small tree/medium shrub category only to create a distinct barrier between conservation lands to discourage encroachment
- Eliminate large/medium tree and small shrub/groundcover requirements

Section 122-49(b)(2)a

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft Remove	6 native species	27 0
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft Remove	3 native species	80 0

3. Buffers with existing mature trees

Issue: Existing, mature trees within a buffer can limit the available planting area, making it difficult to comply with the large/medium tree requirement for a new buffer.

Current Requirements: The code does not distinguish between newly installed and existing trees within buffers.

Recommended Revision:

Section 122-49(e)

Allow property owners to receive "credit" for existing mature large/medium size trees within a buffer based on diameter at breast height (DBH) measurements of the existing tree(s)

- DBH 6-10" = two trees
- DBH 10.1-20" = three trees
- DBH 20" or greater = four trees

Benefits/Rationale:

- Recognizes the benefits of large, mature trees
- Reduces harm to existing tree roots and promotes survivability of newly installed trees
- Lowers cost for property owners

4. Powerlines and public utility easements within required buffer areas

Issue: Overhead powerlines or underground utility easements can be present within the buffer area making it difficult to accommodate certain plant types

Current Requirements: Section 122-48(d) allows for buffers to be increased in size (depth) to avoid conflicts with overhead powerlines or public utility easements; however, sometimes this is not feasible.

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft	6 native species	27
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

4. Powerlines and public utility easements within required buffer areas

Powerlines Recommended Revision

Change the quantities required for large/medium trees to small trees for the area of buffer located beneath the powerlines.

Section 122-49(f)(1)

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft	6 native species	27
Small Trees	1 per 200 sq ft	5 native species	10
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

Benefits/Rationale:

- Reduces conflict with plants growing into powerlines as they mature
- Eliminates need for a variance
- Lowers cost for property owners

4. Powerlines and public utility easements within required buffer areas

Public Utility Easement Recommended Revisions

- Eliminate requirements for large/medium trees and small trees/medium shrubs for the portion of the buffer within the easement. Require groundcovers only.
- Plant quantities for large/medium trees and small trees/medium shrubs will be calculated for the remaining buffer outside of the easement.

Section 122-49(f)(2)

Plant Category	Quantity	Diversity	Number (2000 sq ft buffer)
Large/Medium Trees	1 per 75 sq ft	6 native species	27
Small Trees/Medium Shrubs	1 per 30 sq ft	5 native species	67; 25% must be small trees
Small Shrubs/Groundcovers	1 per 25 sq ft	3 native species	80

Benefits/Rationale:

- Reduces likelihood of root systems compromising below ground utilities
- Eliminates need for a variance
- Lowers cost for property owners

5. Stormwater areas within required buffer areas

Issue: Increasingly, stormwater areas overlap with required buffer areas. Because these areas hold water and can be subject to holding storm surge for extended periods of time, the plant palette is limited making it difficult to comply with species diversity requirements.

Current Requirements: Not currently addressed in the code

Recommended Revisions: Decrease species diversity requirements in areas where vegetation buffers overlap with designated stormwater areas.

Section 122-49(f)(3)

Species Diversity	Large/Med Trees	Small Trees/Med Shrubs	Small Shrubs/ Groundcovers
Current Requirement	6 species	5 species	3 species
Proposed Requirement	3 species	3 species	3 species

Benefits/Rationale:

- Increases plant survival by following "right plant, right place"
- Limits replacement of plants that don't survive, lowering cost for property owners

6. Phased installation of buffers

Issue: Installation of can be costly, especially for new development or lawfully existing non-conforming properties with little to no existing plants within required buffer areas.

Current Requirements: The code does not contain any language regarding phased buffer installation, but this is often a request from property owners/applicants.

Recommended Revision: Mirror current buffer compliance deferment stipulation agreement language

Section 122-50(f): A property owner may provide a request in writing for phased installation of required vegetation buffers. The property owner must sign a Stipulation of Phased Vegetation Buffer Installation Agreement and incorporate an approved vegetation buffer plan to ensure the property owner will fully comply with the requirements of this division. Under phased installation, front buffers shall be installed first and must be completed within 12 months of permit approval. Twelve months shall be provided for each additional buffer (i.e. side and rear buffers), up to 48 months for vegetation buffer compliance along all property lines.

Benefits/Rationale:

- Provides property owners a longer timeline for compliance
- Allows cost of buffer installation to be spread over multiple years

7. Compliance following natural disaster

Issue: Recent hurricanes and storm surge events have impacted buffer compliance; i.e. required quantities of plants within buffer areas

Current Requirements: Sec. 122-51 – Maintenance standards require buffers that fall out of compliance to be restored within 30 days of notification. The language is general and would currently apply to natural disasters.

Recommend Revision: Mirror language under the post natural disaster build-back standards in Sec. 126-212.

Section 122-51(b): Required vegetation buffers destroyed or damaged by accidental fire or other natural and disastrous force must be brought into compliance within two years of the date of destruction or damage. If the declared state of local emergency extends beyond six months, all required vegetation buffers must be reestablished within three years. If the declared state of local emergency extends beyond one year, all required buffers must be reestablished within four years. If another state of local emergency is declared during an existing reestablishment period, the more recent state of local emergency will reset the reestablishment period for buffer compliance. To the extent practicable, the first buffer to be reestablished shall be the front buffer followed by side and rear buffers.

Benefits/Rationale:

- Provides property owners a longer timeline for compliance

Questions/Discussion

1. Plant quantities in front buffer
2. Land use adjacent to side & rear buffers for commercial/institutional properties
3. Buffers with existing mature trees
4. Powerlines and public utility easements within required buffer areas
5. Stormwater areas within required buffer areas
6. Phased installation of buffers
7. Compliance following natural disaster
8. Other?