

Marco Island, Florida

Landscape Ordinance Reform

Proposed Amendment to Chapter 30, Article VII, Division 4

*Eliminating Mandatory Turf Grass — Embracing Florida-Friendly Landscaping and
Expanding Property Owner Choice*

Prepared for the Waterways Advisory Committee
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Part I: Position Paper

The Case for Eliminating Mandatory Turf Grass on Marco Island

Marco Island is a community built around one of Florida's most extraordinary natural environments. Our canals, beaches, and subtropical ecosystem draw residents and visitors from around the world. Yet our current landscape ordinance contains a quiet contradiction: while it explicitly promotes water conservation, native plants, and Florida-Friendly landscaping, it simultaneously defaults to requiring conventional turf grass as the primary ground cover for residential, commercial, and institutional properties. This paper argues that the mandatory turf grass requirement is environmentally

counterproductive, economically costly to property owners, and inconsistent with the City's own stated values. It should be replaced with a flexible standard that gives property owners three equally valid choices: conventional turf grass, Florida-Friendly native landscaping, or compliant synthetic turf — without requiring special permission from the City for any of them.

1. The Environmental Case

Turf grass is among the most resource-intensive landscape choices available in Southwest Florida. Research from the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) consistently identifies conventional lawn turf as a leading contributor to residential water consumption, fertilizer runoff, and pesticide use — three of the most significant threats to Florida's coastal water quality.

On Marco Island, where stormwater ultimately flows into the waters of Rookery Bay and the Ten Thousand Islands — a National Estuarine Research Reserve — the cumulative impact of mandatory turf across hundreds of properties is substantial. Nitrogen and phosphorus from lawn fertilizers, along with pesticide residues, are carried by irrigation runoff and stormwater directly into our canals and nearshore waters. The results are visible: algae blooms, degraded seagrass beds, and declining water clarity.

Florida-Friendly landscaping — featuring native plants, drought-tolerant species, groundcovers, and mulched beds — requires dramatically less water, fertilizer, and chemical treatment once established. Compliant synthetic turf, when properly installed, eliminates irrigation, fertilizer, and pesticide use entirely in the areas where it is placed. Both alternatives represent meaningful environmental improvements over mandatory conventional turf. The State of Florida, through the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program, has codified this in law: Section 373.185, Florida Statutes, explicitly limits HOA restrictions on Florida-Friendly landscapes, reflecting the Legislature's recognition that encouraging such landscapes is a matter of statewide environmental policy.

2. The Water Conservation Case

Marco Island's landscape code already states clearly that one of its core purposes is to "promote water conservation by encouraging the use of native and drought-tolerant vegetation." The mandatory turf requirement directly undermines this goal. Turf grass is a high-water-demand landscape element, and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has consistently identified residential irrigation as the largest single category of residential water use in Southwest Florida — accounting for more than 50% of consumption.

Both Florida-Friendly native landscapes and compliant synthetic turf dramatically reduce or eliminate irrigation demand. Cities including Cape Coral, Sarasota, and Sanibel have already updated ordinances to prioritize Florida-Friendly landscaping over conventional turf. Allowing synthetic turf as a permitted alternative — without requiring a special city approval — takes this one step further, giving property owners a zero-irrigation option that also eliminates the need for fertilizers and pesticides entirely.

3. The Economic Case for Property Owners

Maintaining conventional turf grass in Southwest Florida is expensive. Between irrigation costs, fertilization, mowing, pest control, and periodic resodding following drought or disease, a typical Marco Island residential lawn can cost property owners \$2,000 to \$5,000 or more annually. Many property owners — particularly seasonal residents — find turf maintenance burdensome and would prefer a low-maintenance alternative.

Compliant synthetic turf, once installed, eliminates virtually all recurring turf maintenance costs. Florida-Friendly native landscapes, once established, similarly require minimal ongoing investment. Both alternatives provide property owners with practical, attractive, and legally sound options that reduce their annual landscape burden. Removing the requirement to obtain special city permission for synthetic turf — beyond the standard material specifications already in the code — reduces bureaucratic friction and respects property owner autonomy.

4. The Internal Consistency Case

Marco Island's landscape code declares in Section 30-432 that its purpose is to "promote water conservation by encouraging the use of native and drought-tolerant vegetation" and to "promote preservation and planting of native plants and plant communities." Section 30-435(e)(2) states that "Florida-Friendly landscape practices are encouraged in all zoning districts." The existing synthetic turf provisions in Section 30-435(i) establish detailed, rigorous standards for synthetic turf quality and installation.

Yet despite all of this, Section 30-435(e)(1) still requires that "all lawn areas shall be sodded and/or planted with turf species." This structural contradiction — the code encourages alternatives while mandating conventional turf — should be resolved. The reform proposed here does so by replacing the turf mandate with a flexible ground cover standard under which conventional turf, Florida-Friendly native landscaping, and compliant synthetic turf are all expressly equal and permitted choices.

5. The Swale Exception: A Sound and Necessary Limit

This proposal retains the existing prohibition on synthetic turf in swales used for stormwater retention, and extends that prohibition expressly to the new framework. This is appropriate and environmentally sound. Swales serve a critical drainage function on Marco Island: they collect, filter, and slowly release stormwater runoff, reducing flooding and improving water quality before runoff reaches our canals. Living vegetation — whether natural turf, native groundcovers, or other approved species — plays a direct role in this filtration process. Synthetic turf, regardless of its permeability, does not provide the biological filtration capacity of living plants and is not appropriate in stormwater retention swales.

Retaining this limitation also addresses potential concerns about the broader synthetic turf amendment, demonstrating that the reform is targeted and environmentally responsible — not a blanket authorization of synthetic surfaces regardless of context.

6. What This Reform Proposes

This proposal accomplishes four things:

- Removes the mandate for conventional turf grass as the required ground cover, replacing it with a flexible standard.
- Establishes Florida-Friendly native landscaping as an expressly equal and permitted alternative to conventional turf, without requiring special permission from the City.
- Establishes compliant synthetic turf (meeting the existing material and installation standards of Section 30-435(i)) as an expressly equal and permitted alternative, without requiring special permission from the City — except that synthetic turf remains prohibited in stormwater retention swales.
- Does not ban conventional turf grass. Property owners who prefer a traditional lawn remain entirely free to install one.

The City's existing authority to review and approve landscape plans is unchanged. Material specifications, installation standards, and maintenance requirements for synthetic turf under Section 30-435(i) remain in full effect. What changes is the default: instead of mandatory turf, the default is informed property owner choice — consistent with the City's own commitment to environmental stewardship.

7. Recommendation

The City Council should direct staff to prepare an amendment to Chapter 30, Article VII, Division 4, consistent with the proposed language set forth in Part II of this document. The amendment should be brought forward for public hearing and adoption at the earliest practicable opportunity.

Part II: Proposed Ordinance Language

The following presents the current ordinance text alongside the proposed amended language. Current text is shown on a yellow background; proposed amended text is shown on a green background.

Sec. 30-432. — Intent and Purpose (No Change Proposed)

No amendment is proposed to Section 30-432. The existing statement of intent — including its commitment to water conservation, native plant preservation, and Florida-Friendly landscaping — is affirmed and should be understood as the interpretive framework for all provisions that follow.

Sec. 30-435(e)(1). — Ground Covers: Lawn Grass [AMENDED]

CURRENT TEXT:

(1) Lawn grass. All lawn areas shall be sodded and/or planted with turf species normally grown as permanent lawns within the Southwest Florida area. Solid sod shall be used in swales or other areas subject to erosion. The use of drought-tolerant species is encouraged. Reference the city public right-of-way ordinance for requirements within the public right-of-way.

PROPOSED AMENDED TEXT:

(1) Ground Cover.

All pervious yard areas shall be installed with approved ground cover that provides complete coverage, prevents erosion, and is consistent with the intent and purposes of this code. Property owners may select from any of the following approved ground cover options without the need for special approval or variance from the City, provided that the selected material meets the applicable standards of this code:

- Conventional turf or sod species normally grown as permanent lawns within the Southwest Florida area, including drought-tolerant turf species;
- Florida-Friendly native groundcovers, ornamental grasses, low-growing shrubs, mulched planting beds with living plants, or any combination thereof, consistent with the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles described in Section 30-435(e)(2); or
- Synthetic turf meeting the material, installation, and maintenance standards set forth in Section 30-435(i), except that synthetic turf is expressly prohibited in swales used for stormwater retention, where living vegetation is required.

Notwithstanding the above, solid sod or equivalent living erosion-resistant ground cover shall be required in all stormwater retention swales and other areas subject to erosion, regardless of the ground cover choice selected for the remainder of the property. The use of drought-tolerant and native species is strongly encouraged. Reference the city public right-of-way ordinance for requirements within the public right-of-way.

Sec. 30-435(e)(2). — Florida-Friendly Landscape [STRENGTHENED]

CURRENT TEXT (opening):

(2) Florida-friendly landscape. Florida-friendly landscape practices are encouraged in all zoning districts. Landscape areas utilizing Florida-friendly designs are those that comply with the principals of Florida-Friendly Landscape consistent with the standards provided in the following publications...

PROPOSED AMENDED TEXT (opening paragraph only; referenced publications and nine principles unchanged):

(2) Florida-Friendly Landscape. Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ practices are permitted and encouraged in all zoning districts as an equal and preferred alternative to conventional turf or sod. A landscape plan that complies with the nine principles of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ as referenced herein shall be deemed to satisfy the ground cover requirements of Section 30-435(e)(1) in full, and no property owner shall be required to install or maintain conventional lawn turf as a condition of permit issuance, certificate of completion, or certificate of occupancy where an approved Florida-Friendly landscape design has been incorporated into the landscape plan. The referenced publications, nine principles, and all other provisions of this subsection remain in full effect.

Sec. 30-435(i). — Synthetic Turf [CONFORMING AMENDMENT]

The existing synthetic turf standards in Section 30-435(i) — covering material specifications, installation requirements, maintenance obligations, and the existing prohibition on synthetic turf in the public right-of-way and swales — remain in full effect and are not amended by this ordinance. The following conforming language is added at the beginning of Section 30-435(i)(1) to clarify the relationship between the synthetic turf standards and the amended ground cover requirements:

NEW INTRODUCTORY LANGUAGE ADDED TO SEC. 30-435(i)(1):

(i) Synthetic Turf. Synthetic turf that meets the standards of this section is a permitted ground cover alternative under Section 30-435(e)(1) and may be installed by any property owner without special permission or variance from the City, subject to the material, installation, maintenance, and location requirements of this section. For the avoidance of doubt, synthetic turf remains prohibited in stormwater retention swales and in the public right-of-way as provided herein. All other standards of this section remain in full effect.

All remaining provisions of Section 30-435(i) — including standards for materials, cut pile specifications, weight, permeability, warranty, installation by a licensed professional, drainage systems, infill requirements, maintenance obligations, and sports court exceptions — are unchanged and remain in full effect.

Sec. 30-433. — Irrigation Plan Requirements [AMENDED]

The current irrigation plan requirements were written with the assumption that all pervious yard areas would be planted with conventional turf requiring regular supplemental irrigation. With the adoption of Florida-Friendly native landscaping and compliant synthetic turf as permitted ground cover alternatives, the irrigation requirements must be updated to reflect the materially different water needs — or absence thereof — of these alternatives.

CURRENT TEXT (Sec. 30-433(2), opening):

(2) Irrigation plan required. All new single-family residences, multifamily, commercial and institutional developments shall be irrigated by the use of an automatic irrigation system with controller set to apply water in a manner consistent with this code. Irrigation plans for multifamily, commercial and institutional developments shall be prepared by persons qualified to prepare irrigation plans, such as an irrigation designer or landscape architect. Moisture detection devices shall be installed with all automatic sprinkler systems to override the sprinkler activation mechanism during periods of increased rainfall. Where existing irrigation systems are modified requiring the acquisition of a permit, automatic activation systems and overriding moisture detection devices shall be installed in compliance with this code.

PROPOSED AMENDED TEXT:

(2) Irrigation plan required.

Irrigation plan and system requirements shall be determined based on the type of approved ground cover selected by the property owner under Section 30-435(e)(1), as follows:

(a) Conventional turf or sod. All new single-family residences, multifamily, commercial, and institutional developments utilizing conventional turf or sod as the primary ground cover shall be irrigated by the use of an automatic irrigation system with a controller set to apply water in a manner consistent with this code. Irrigation plans for multifamily, commercial, and institutional developments shall be prepared by a qualified irrigation designer or landscape architect. Moisture detection devices shall be installed with all automatic sprinkler systems to override the sprinkler activation mechanism during periods of increased rainfall. Where existing irrigation systems are modified requiring a permit, automatic activation systems and overriding moisture detection devices shall be installed in compliance with this code. These requirements are unchanged from prior law.

(b) Florida-Friendly native landscaping. Properties utilizing an approved Florida-Friendly native landscape design under Section 30-435(e)(2) as the primary ground cover shall not be

required to install a permanent automatic irrigation system, provided that all of the following conditions are met:

- The landscape plan submitted with the building permit or site development plan designates the ground cover as a Florida-Friendly native landscape consistent with Section 30-435(e)(2) and is accepted by the city manager or designee;
- A temporary irrigation system, water truck, or hand watering by hose shall be used during the plant establishment period, not to exceed twelve (12) months from the date of installation, after which supplemental irrigation shall be on an as-needed basis only consistent with Section 30-433(3); and
- Any portion of the property retaining conventional turf or sod shall comply with the automatic irrigation system requirements of subsection (a) above for those areas.

Where a permanent irrigation system is voluntarily installed in a Florida-Friendly native landscape area, it shall be designed as a low-volume drip or micro-irrigation system zoned separately from any turf areas, and shall include a moisture detection device and rain sensor override. High-volume overhead spray systems shall not be used in areas planted exclusively with native groundcovers or drought-tolerant species.

(c) Synthetic turf. Properties utilizing compliant synthetic turf under Section 30-435(i) as the primary ground cover shall not be required to install or maintain an automatic irrigation system for those areas. Irrigation of synthetic turf for non-active use is prohibited under Section 30-435(i)(2)(g). Any existing irrigation system serving an area converted to synthetic turf shall have sprinkler heads removed and pipes capped below ground in accordance with Section 30-435(i)(2)(h). Any portion of the property retaining conventional turf or sod shall comply with the automatic irrigation system requirements of subsection (a) above for those areas.

(d) Mixed ground cover. Where a property utilizes a combination of conventional turf, Florida-Friendly native landscaping, and/or synthetic turf, irrigation system requirements shall apply zone by zone based on the ground cover type in each zone. Irrigation zones shall be designed to prevent the application of water to synthetic turf areas or to established drought-tolerant native plant areas not requiring supplemental irrigation. Sprinkler heads shall not be positioned to apply water across zone boundaries from turf areas onto synthetic turf or established native landscape areas.

All other provisions of Section 30-433 — including irrigation plan submittal requirements for multifamily, commercial and institutional developments; single-family residence inspection requirements; plan drawing standards; existing plant community provisions; and general irrigation system design standards — remain in full effect and are unchanged by this amendment.

Part III: Summary of Proposed Changes

The proposed amendments make the following changes to Chapter 30, Article VII, Division 4:

- Section 30-435(e)(1): Replaces the mandatory turf grass requirement with a flexible ground cover standard that expressly permits three equal alternatives — conventional turf, Florida-Friendly native landscaping, and compliant synthetic

turf — without requiring special city permission for any of them. Living vegetation remains required in stormwater retention swales.

- Section 30-435(e)(2): Strengthens the Florida-Friendly Landscape provision by confirming it is a full substitute for conventional turf, not merely “encouraged.”
- Section 30-435(i): Adds conforming language confirming that compliant synthetic turf is a permitted ground cover alternative by right, not by special permission, while all existing synthetic turf standards remain fully in effect.
- Section 30-433(2): Replaces the universal automatic irrigation requirement with a ground-cover-specific framework: conventional turf retains the full existing irrigation requirement (unchanged); Florida-Friendly native landscapes are exempt from mandatory permanent irrigation, with temporary establishment watering for up to 12 months; synthetic turf areas are fully exempt; and mixed-use properties are governed zone by zone. Voluntary irrigation in native landscape areas must use low-volume drip or micro-irrigation, not overhead spray.

These changes are consistent with Marco Island’s existing landscape code goals, aligned with statewide environmental policy under §373.185, F.S., and responsive to the practical interests of Marco Island property owners. They reduce costs for residents, protect our waterways, preserve the critical stormwater function of swales, and bring our ordinance into alignment with the environmental values our community holds.

Marco Island has an opportunity to lead Southwest Florida on this issue. The science supports it. State law supports it. Our residents’ interests support it. The time to act is now.

Current Ordinance: Mandatory Turf Grass



Proposed Ordinance: Florida-Friendly Landscaping

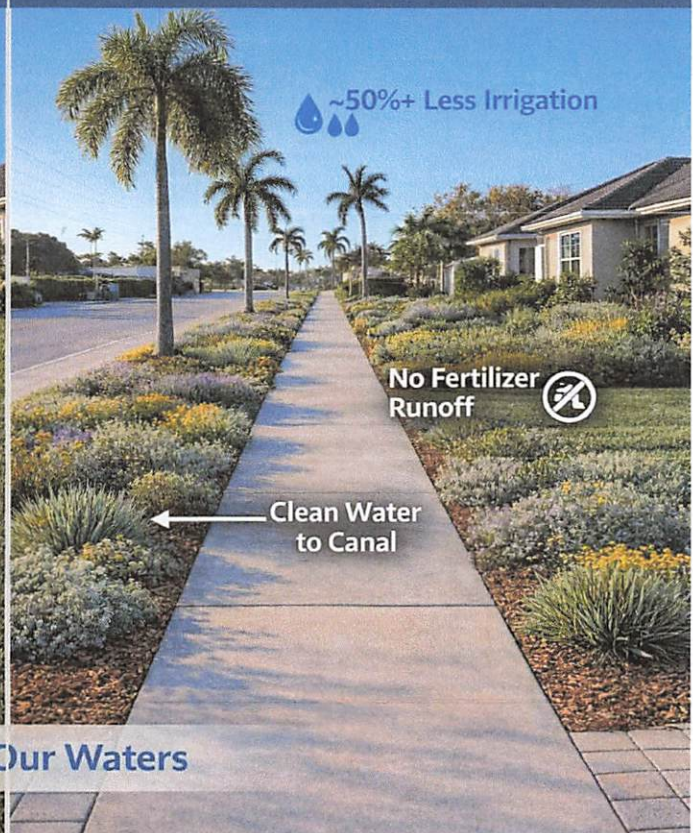


Protecting Our Canals

Current Ordinance: Mandatory Turf Grass



Proposed Ordinance: Florida-Friendly Landscaping



Protecting Our Waters

