Director's Report and Recommendations

Utility landscaping & screening amendments

Overview

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is proposing amendments to the Land Use Code to clarify and strengthen development standards for solid waste transfer stations and utility services uses. Utility services uses are facilities built to transfer or deliver power, water, sewage, stormwater runoff, and similar substances; these include electrical substations, combined sewer overflows, pumping stations, and trolley transformers.

While facilities should be designed to minimize impacts on surrounding neighborhoods, the Land Use Code has unclear or inconsistent standards for these uses in many zones. In some cases, standards are lacking. DPD's proposal focuses on establishing appropriate setbacks, screening, and landscaping provisions for these uses. The proposed standards vary among zones, consistent with the neighborhood character intended to be achieved by different designations.

It is important to note that transfer stations and utility services uses are reviewed by the Seattle Design Commission, and these uses also require approval by City Council in some zones. So, while the proposed code changes would establish a new baseline for the provision of landscaping and screening, Design Commission recommendations and/or Council review may result in different or additional provisions.

Also, the proposals here address transfer stations and utility services uses, which represent a subset of all utilities; communications utilities, power plants, sewage treatment facilities, and other utilities are not within the scope of this draft ordinance.

Background and Analysis

Transfer stations

Solid waste transfer stations (transfer stations) are an important part of the City's solid waste recycling and disposal system. Seattle Public Utilities operates two of these facilities: the North Recycling and Disposal Station (NRDS) in Wallingford and the South Recycling and Disposal Station (SRDS) between Georgetown and South Park. The NRDS is located in an IC-45 (Industrial Commercial with 45' height limit) zone and the SRDS is in an IG2 (General Industrial 2) zone. SPU is in the process of demolishing and rebuilding both sites with the intention of increasing capacity and modernizing recycling facilities.

Improved design and technology at the new transfer stations is also intended to help these facilities fit better in their respective neighborhoods, reducing or eliminating noise and odor impacts. The proposed landscaping and screening standards are intended to further help these facilities fit into neighborhoods, especially where the facility's structures are large compared to other development in the area.

DPD proposes to apply the Seattle Green Factor to transfer stations. Green Factor is a landscape scoring system that encourages a desirable mix of conventional landscape features (trees, shrubs, groundcovers) with strong incentives for tree preservation, native plants, green roofs and walls, permeable paving, rainwater harvesting, and landscaping visible to the public. Green Factor's flexibility would accommodate site and program differences between the two sites while ensuring good landscape coverage.

To establish the proposed minimum Green Factor score, DPD analyzed the August 17, 2009 concept proposal for SRDS. This plan includes generous landscaping, with substantial new plantings, preservation of existing trees, and use of native plants. When entered into the Green Factor score sheet, the landscape plan receives a score of approximately 0.40, roughly equivalent to landscaping 40% of the site. Note that drainage review will likely require the site design to incorporate additional green stormwater infrastructure, such as permeable paving or bioretention; these features would slightly increase the Green Factor score above 0.40.

Plans for the north station have not yet been developed to the same level as the south station. Since SRDS provides an example of good transfer station landscaping, DPD analyzed what a required score of 0.40 would mean for NRDS. Assuming lot coverage and tree canopy would be similar to the existing site, NRDS could meet 0.40 with additional plantings of native or drought-tolerant shrubs and perennials and either a) a vegetated wall covering half of the north wall of the structure, or b) permeable sidewalks surrounding the site.

Based on these studies, DPD recommends a minimum score of 0.40 for both sites. By way of comparison, this requirement would be higher than the 0.30 required of most commercial and mixed-use development in the city's commercial zones. Additional language is proposed to allow applicants to calculate Green Factor together for multiple adjacent parcels. This provision responds to uncertainty about the eventual site program at NRDS. The proposal is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Solid Waste Transfer Stations

Zone	Current standards	Proposed additional standards
IC and IG	15' triangular front setback if abutting residential lots, blank facades limited to 60'.	0.40 Green Factor minimum score, may be calculated together for multiple adjacent parcels related to a single facility. Required view-obscuring screening if abutting or across the street from residential use.

Utility Services Uses

Utility services uses are facilities that transfer or deliver power, water, sewage, stormwater runoff, and similar substances; these include electrical substations, combined sewer overflows, pumping stations, and trolley transformers. Facilities falling into this use category range widely in terms of parcel size, purpose, and program constraints or needs. All zone designations allow for these uses according to various approval processes.

DPD initially considered applying a Green Factor score to these facilities. Given the diversity of projects, however, this was determined not to be an appropriate solution. Some utility services uses are very limited in terms of being able to provide landscaping on the site. For example, overhead equipment at electrical substations limits trees, and many facilities have specific landscaping constraints relating to security and public safety.

Most utility services face rights-of-way with a fence or free-standing wall. These are often tall to discourage climbing, and can create a negative visual impact, especially when blank. DPD's proposal focuses on treatment of these walls, requiring landscaped setbacks and/or architectural detailing where appropriate. Proposals for specific zones are based on the intent of the zone and potential impact to surrounding uses, and on consistency with screening

Table 2: Utility Services Uses

Zone	Current standards for utility service uses	Proposed standards
SFR	Treated as institutions, minimum 5-10' setback on structures, no setback for fences and free-standing walls. Landscaping must "integrate the [substation] with adjacent areas." (23.44.022).	Minimum 10' landscaped setback between ROW and fences/free-standing walls; Director may modify to accommodate special needs and achieve intended screening performance.
MF	7-foot average setback for structures with a 5-foot minimum. No setback for fences and free-standing walls 6' and shorter. 0.50 Green Factor required for midrise and highrise, 0.60 proposed for lowrise. Utilities not specifically addressed.	7-foot average landscaped setback between ROW and fences/free-standing walls; Director may modify to accommodate special needs and achieve intended screening performance.
C/NC	15' triangular setback for structures, no setback for fences 6' and shorter (23.47A.014). 0.30 Green Factor. Utilities not specifically addressed.	5' landscaped setback between ROW and fences/free-standing walls OR architectural detailing or similar features approved by the Director.
Seattle Mixed	Setbacks limited (30% on Ped streets, 12' deep on others). If used, landscaping is required (23.48.024). Blank facades limited to 15-30' in length. Utilities not specifically addressed.	5' landscaped setback between ROW and fences/free-standing walls OR architectural detailing or similar features approved by the Director.
Downtown	Setbacks limited to 10' deep maximum, blank facades limited to 15-30'. Utilities not specifically addressed.	5' landscaped setback between ROW and fences/free-standing walls OR architectural detailing or similar features approved by the Director.
Industrial	IB: 5' setback required if across from residential lots. IC: 15' triangle required if abutting residential lots. Blank facades no greater than 60'. Utilities not specifically addressed.	<u>If abutting or across the street from residential lots:</u> 5' landscaped setback between ROW and fences/free-standing walls OR architectural detailing or similar features approved by the Director.

standards for other uses in that zone.

Recommendation

In order to permit these necessary facilities and help them better fit into existing neighborhoods, the Director recommends approval of the proposed screening and landscaping proposal as summarized below:

- Green Factor and screening standards for transfer stations in IC and IG zones.
- Landscaped setbacks or architectural detailing for fences/free-standing walls in utility services uses. Required setback depth varies by zone.