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Get paid to go green?

Oviedo ponders cash incentives to add Florida plants, cut water use

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October 21, 2007

The city of Oviedo might pay homeowners \$1,000 to tear up their water-guzzling lawns and replace them with drought-resistant plants.

City officials also are poised to approve tougher rules for new development, limiting high-water use to 30 percent of a home's yard.

The aim is to avoid a crisis situation like that facing Georgia, where Gov. Sonny Perdue on Saturday declared a state of emergency for the northern third of the state. He also asked President Bush to declare it a major disaster area. State officials warned that Lake Lanier, a 38,000-acre reservoir that supplies the Atlanta area, is less than three months from depletion. Smaller reservoirs are dropping even lower.

The situation in Central Florida is nowhere near as critical, but many local governments have ordinances that encourage or require landscaping that conserves water in new developments. But Oviedo appears to be on the cutting edge with its proposed incentives program.

Though some utilities have helped homeowners with the costs of things such as low-flow shower heads, larger rebates for drastic landscaping changes could be a first in Central Florida, local water-conservation experts said.

"Sometimes you've got to encourage the people," said Eileen Tramontana, education and volunteer manager for St. Johns River Water Management District. "I think you'll probably see more Florida communities hopefully follow suit because Florida is in a water crunch."

Apopka is considering a similar incentive program for landscaping and irrigation changes, though City Administrator Richard Anderson said no specific amounts have been proposed.

Mount Dora officials have also been talking about incentives, and the subject might be brought up at a city meeting Monday.



DeLand recently passed impact-fee credits for new development with water-wise landscaping, city officials said. Now, the city is considering small prizes such as T-shirts or gift certificates for residents who conserve water.

As the region grows and the Floridan Aquifer gets closer to reaching its limit, there are plans to supplement the water supply by treating water from the St. Johns River for drinking.

But Oviedo officials say decreasing consumption is as important as increasing supply.

And "the No. 1 problem is lawns," said council member Steve Henken, who has been pushing for the ordinance.

Tramontana agreed that traditional lawns can be water gluttons.

"The grass is your largest consumer of water in the landscape," she said. Replacing it with landscaping that doesn't guzzle water can save, on average, at least 40 percent, Tramontana said.

"If you don't have a purpose for your grass . . . a play area for your children or dogs or something like that, you really don't need the grass," she said. "We've just gotten used to it. For wildlife, for water, for pollution, doing Florida-friendly landscaping is actually much more beneficial."

Owners associations react

But it's still a relatively new idea in Florida, and Oviedo is expecting some resistance from homeowners associations. Henken said the president of his own homeowners association in the Riverside community has been wary of the efforts.

"If one individual did that, it would stick out like a sore thumb," said Joe D'Aulerio, president of Riverside at Twin Rivers Community Association. "The homeowners association is responsible for trying to keep the community uniform and trying to keep property values high."

Around Central Florida, homeowners associations have clashed with residents trying to replace their traditional lawns with landscapes that don't require regular watering and maintenance. Many require St. Augustine grass at least in front yards.

Oviedo Deputy Mayor Dominic Persampiere, another proponent of the incentives, said he wants to educate homeowners associations about the efforts. He suggested giving them possible changes to their rules they could use regarding lawns. City officials say their own laws can supersede homeowners-association bylaws in newer communities, but "we're not looking to take away their control," Persampiere said. "This doesn't need a stick."

The city says it will base its requirements for new construction and for incentives on recommendations in a Florida-friendly plant list from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

That offers a lot of flexibility, officials say.

The city's development-services director, Bryan Cobb, told council members last week that Florida-friendly landscaping doesn't have to be "a desert look. It can be a lush, green Florida landscape."

'I think it's a great idea'

Elizabeth Martin tore up much of the grass in her Oviedo home when she moved in almost 15 years ago. Her yard features a lot of mulch, shrubs and trees.

Martin thinks it's smart for Oviedo to consider encouraging similar landscaping plans.

"We're going to have to do something drastic very soon," she said. "People are going to be in a lot of trouble . . . if they don't start cutting back on everything."

Her neighbor Dave Tropf has a yard with no grass. He decided against putting any in his yard when he moved in about 20 years ago. It was more for convenience: "I don't want to mow the stuff," he said. "As the old farmer said, 'Why plant a crop you have to harvest once a week and you can't sell it?'"

But he acknowledges the environmental benefits and likes that his city wants to encourage others to take similar measures.

"I think it's a great idea -- an overdue idea," he said.

The city would also pay smaller sums to homeowners who take less-drastic steps. Proposed incentives include \$2 for flow-restricting water-faucet aerators, \$15 for irrigation rain sensors and \$250 for tankless hot-water heaters.

Oviedo officials aren't sure when the incentives program would get final approval. The landscaping requirements for new homes are expected to be passed in January.

Details such as setting limits for the amount given out each year have yet to be worked out.

Plans are to base the incentives on the square footage of lawns. And there could be a monitoring period to make sure water consumption actually decreases once the landscape has been converted.

Oviedo is considering modeling its system after one in Prescott, Ariz., which has had at least 65 people apply for reimbursement since the city approved its incentive program last year.

"It's really coming to light, I think, in the Midwest, and just nationally, the drought conditions are creating awareness of the need to manage water supply," said Shaun Rydell, that city's water-conservation coordinator. She said hundreds of communities across the United States, many in Arizona and Nevada -- states with a lot of desert and limited water supply -- have such incentive programs.

Information from wire services was used in this report. Sandra Pedicini can be reached at spedicini@orlandosentinel.com or 407-322-7669.

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