

# Thurston County Stormwater Solutions

## LID Fact Sheet: Open Space

### Issue

Open space requirements typically specify a percentage of area that must be set aside in a subdivision, often for recreational uses. Looked at through the lens of low-impact development (LID), requiring open space can reduce the amount of impervious surfaces within a development and allow for the retention of more trees and other vegetation to help filter stormwater runoff. There can be a conflict, however, if open space is intended for active recreational activities — such as the creation of tennis or basketball courts — which create new impervious surfaces, rather than more passive activities.

### Why are changes needed?

Under the Thurston County Code, open space is required only for subdivisions of 10 or more acres in certain zones: RL 2/1, R 3-6/1, R 4-16/1; these are mostly in the Grand Mound area of southwestern Thurston County. For standard subdivisions in these zones, 10% of land must be set aside as open space, and 30% of this must be dedicated for active recreation. There is no requirement that a portion of the open space be set aside in a natural condition, which would help filter stormwater runoff on site.

Open space also is required within the Lacey and Tumwater unincorporated urban growth areas (UGAs). For subdivisions of 10 or more lots, 10% of the total area must be set aside as open space. Olympia is different, as it charges subdivision developers an impact fee for larger parks facilities. No open space set aside is required for other areas of the county.

There are much greater open space requirements when developing a Planned Residential Development (PRD) or a Planned Rural Residential Development (PRRD). These are sometimes referred to as “cluster” developments, and they can provide greater environmental benefits than standard subdivision designs by allowing for smaller lots that are clustered together. More area is set aside, and development is concentrated, so overall impervious area is minimized.

### What changes are proposed to current regulations?

The recommended Thurston County Code changes that follow will help maximize the use of open space for the retention of trees and vegetation and ensure compatibility with use as stormwater facilities, where appropriate. General code changes include:

- Extend 10% open space requirement to all residential zoning districts for subdivisions of five or more lots.
- Add guidance on location of open space and appropriate uses
- Add guidance for resource parcel percentages for PRRDs in zones that do not have these specified: Residential 1/10, Residential 1/20, Urban Reserve, and LAMIRD 1/2.

**What guidance is there for siting open space areas?**

The draft code encourages open space areas be sited and designed to maximize their use for dispersing and infiltrating stormwater. Open space areas should be situated downslope from development when possible, and should be located next to other open space or habitat areas to allow for better connectivity of green spaces. At least 50% of the open space must be contiguous, to allow for larger blocks of land.

**Would all developments need an open space set aside?**

No. The open space requirement would be triggered for all subdivisions of at least five lots — excluding short plats — to set aside 10% of the land as open space. For example, if a 30-acre site is subdivided, three acres of it must be designated open space

**What development and uses are allowed in an open space area?**

Acceptable uses of open space areas include landscaping and greenbelts, active recreation (such as tennis courts or ball fields), passive recreation (such as trails), forestry, agriculture, stormwater management, or tree tracts, if required. Critical areas and their buffers can be located in open space.

**Can a portion of the open space be retained as forest or other habitat?**

The Planning Commission is considering an option to require that 30% of the open space area be maintained in a natural condition – this portion would not be available to use for active recreation, or resource use, such as forestry or agriculture. This portion of the site could contain critical areas, critical area buffers, or other wildlife habitat, but could not be cleared and graded for other uses. Under this provision, for a 30-acre parcel with a three-acre open space requirement, one acre would need to be maintained in a natural condition.

**Would stormwater facilities be allowed within open space areas?**

Yes. A proposed code change would add language about the use of open space for stormwater facilities: Up to 25% of designated open space, outside of critical area buffers, could be used for stormwater facilities. Dispersion would not be counted against this limit. The draft code would also include a provision encouraging the location of open space downslope from development to allow use for stormwater management.

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