

Staff Report

IRONWOOD ESTATES WOODLOT RESTORATION

March 24, 2026

BACKGROUND:

In January 2026, City Council and staff received a letter from Jerry Goldsmith, 2113 Ironwood Lane, requesting the City provide assistance and expertise to restore the woody vegetation that was removed as part of the project to replace an electric transmission line along Highway 30. Council requested a staff memo at its January 27, 2026, meeting about the plan to restore the vegetative screening.

Mr. Goldsmith then sent another letter to Council requesting the City pursue grant funding through the Iowa DOT/DNR Fund that could finance the restoration of vegetative screening. At its February 24, 2026, meeting, Council requested an update regarding the plans for the restoration of the vegetation screening and the funding opportunity through the Iowa DOT/DNR Fund. Electric Services and Parks and Recreation staff met regarding Council's referral and the request made by Mr. Goldsmith.

TRANSMISSION LINE WORK:

City of Ames Electric Services is responsible for a 69,000-volt electric transmission line located in the State of Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) right-of-way along the north side of US Highway 30. The transmission line was originally constructed in the 1970s and was recently replaced due to its age and condition.

One of the steps in the replacement process included removing/clearing vegetation for the contractor to access the area in order to replace poles and the electric cable. A portion of land adjacent to the Ironwood Court Homeowner's Association was cleared of vegetation. The approximate width of the clearing in this area ranges between 20 - 30 feet along the length of the electric transmission line.

Attached is a map of the area which shows the property owners of this area as either the Ironwood Estates Homeowners Association (IEHA) or the Iowa DOT. The City of Ames does not own any property in this area. The City does have an easement on IEHA property to maintain the electric transmission line, but there is no language outlined in the easement as to maintenance responsibilities as it relates to vegetation. The width of easement is ten feet.

The attached photos show the clearing of vegetation that was completed during the project. City staff acknowledges that the contractor did not clean up the debris very well and will ensure that the debris in this area gets cleaned up regardless of what action, if any, City Council takes on this matter. There is a fence on IEHA property that includes tree stumps that have grown into it over the years and had been cut prior to the most recent clearing that took place.

Vegetation removed as part of the project included honeysuckle, hackberry, green ash, boxelder, chokecherry, and eastern red cedar. Most, if not all, of the vegetation removed was a result of volunteer germination. This occurs frequently in open grassy areas that are not maintained.

DOT/DNR FUND GRANT:

The grant opportunity mentioned by Mr. Goldsmith is the DOT/DNR Fund Grant, which is intended to beautify roadsides and primary system corridors with plant materials. These grants are eligible to any tax-levying body and have a maximum award amount of \$100,000. For a project to qualify, the planting site must be on primary highway right-of-way, including primary highway extensions.

Funding will cover the costs of the plants and associated materials, contracted labor, mowing, and other maintenance for one year after installation. An application for a DOT Sponsorship of Highway Plantings permit must also be submitted with the grant application. Applications are accepted year round and, if selected, are funded in the order in which they are received. Applicants can expect to receive a decision in approximately 90 days. Subject to funding availability, the program's annual funding level is normally \$300,000. Please note that if the grant is pursued and received, planting would not take place until fall 2026 at the earliest.

POTENTIAL RESTORATION:

With any restoration project, it is important to review what has been the standard practice. Generally speaking, if this transmission line project were on City property, trees and/or shrubs would not be planted under the lines so the area remained open for future maintenance. Below are a couple of examples:

Stange Electric Substation - Trees were removed and not replaced. An adjacent property owner voiced concerns regarding having to look at the substation now that the trees were gone. Ames Electric did plant evergreens on City property to provide screening.

Munn Woods Sanitary Sewer Project - Vegetation, including trees and shrubs, were removed to gain access to the sanitary sewer through the woods. At the end of the project, crushed rock was put down with the hope of ground cover establishing itself through the rocks as time passes. No trees or other vegetation was planted so the sanitary sewer can be easily accessed if needed.

Another issue to consider is that the City does not take responsibility for private property. If property owners wish to install a fence or vegetative screening, they can do so on their property at their expense. As with any potential solution, there are pros and cons to consider before moving forward. Staff has discussed the idea of restoration, including securing grant funds, and formulated the following list for the Council to consider:

Pros:

- The grant could provide a non-City funding source to address the IEHA concerns
- Restoration would create a future vegetative screen between IEHA homes and Highway 30

Cons:

- Grant funding only covers materials, contracted labor, seed or live plants, watering and other maintenance for one year after installation

- Grant funding only allows planting on DOT right-of-way property
- Any planting on IEHA property would need a funding source other than the grant
- The City is responsible for all future maintenance once the work is completed if grant money is used
- Grant funds may not be available (in this instance, the City would be responsible for all restoration costs if Council directs staff to restore the area)
- The vegetation may have to be removed again in the future in order to conduct maintenance on the electric transmission line
- If grant funding is secured, the City would need to pay for the renovation and then get reimbursed from the DOT/DNR Fund
- Performing work on non-City property may set an undesirable precedent

OPTIONS:

Given the above information, staff discussed several options for the City Council to consider. Please note that staff will ensure that debris left in the area will be cleaned up regardless of which option is selected. Thus, the options focus on what to do after the debris is cleaned up. Options 1, 3, and 4 focus on DOT property while option 2 includes improvements to the IEHA property. If the IEHA would like to add any type of a vegetative screening that would benefit their properties, they have the right to do so on their property.

Option 1 - Take No Further Action than Clearing the Debris:

Resprouting vegetation due to the existing seed bank will likely fill in the area and provide adequate visual screening of US Highway 30 within two growing seasons. This option would require no additional City resources, and the area would eventually look similar to what the site was prior to the electric transmission line project. Electric Services would need to monitor the easement area to ensure vegetation does not grow into the electric lines.

Option 2 - IEHA Plants Vegetation on Its Property:

IEHA can install and maintain any type of screening (vegetative/non-vegetative) on their property that is compliant with the City of Ames Municipal Code. All costs incurred under this option would be the responsibility of IEHA. **If Council believes the City should incur this expense, City funding would need to be identified. A potential option would be for IEHA to apply for a Neighborhood Improvement Grant, which could be used towards the purchase of trees or shrubs to be planted on their property.**

Option 3 - Plant Iowa Native Shrubs:

City of Ames staff would contract for the installation of two staggered rows, approximately 750 feet long, of Iowa native shrub seedlings (approx. 250 seedlings) to be planted in the area that was cleared from the electric transmission line project. The shrub seedlings average two to three feet tall when planted and would have a mature height of approximately 10 to 15 feet. The planting installation would include an application of mulch around the seedlings to prevent weed encroachment. Also included in the contracted work would be mowing around the seedlings. The approximate contracted cost to complete this work which includes the planting, mulch, watering, and mowing for one year after planting is approximate \$15,000 - \$20,000. The plantings for this option would be on DOT property and therefore grant funds could be applied for.

Option 4 - Plant Junipers:

City of Ames staff would contract for the installation of one row of Green Columnar Junipers (approx. 20) on DOT property. As part of the planting, mulch would be applied and watering would be completed on a regular basis for one year following planting. The Junipers would reach a mature height of 15 to 25 feet tall between 10 and 20 years. A contractor would be responsible for watering and other maintenance to prevent encroachment of volunteer vegetation. The approximate cost is \$20,000 - \$25,000. Grant funds could be applied to cover the costs of the plantings, labor, watering, and materials for one year after installation. The City likely would be responsible for maintaining it after year one.

STAFF COMMENTS:

City Council must first decide whether this project should be the responsibility of the City. The standard practice for all City of Ames Electrical Easements is that if cutting or clearing is necessary to maintain or replace infrastructure, vegetation is not replaced. According to the agreement granting the City the right to place and maintain this electrical line, there is no language that requires the City to replace the vegetation that was removed on DOT property. If Council agrees with its existing practices of not replacing vegetation, then staff's recommendation is to proceed with Option 1 or 2.

If Council feels that the City should replace the vegetation then Option 3 or 4 should be considered. If either one of those options is chosen, then the responsibility for maintenance for this area is not only for one year, but indefinitely. There is a high likelihood that even despite the City's effort to restore the area, volunteer vegetation will eventually encroach upon the plantings without recurring annual maintenance. If option 3 or 4 is chosen, Council would be setting a precedent for future instances involving City Electric easements, and funding to complete this work will need to be identified as there is no current funding designated for this work.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[Ironwood Estates Aerial Photo.jpg](#)

[Electrical Line Easement Tree Clearing pic 1](#)

[Electrical Line Easement Tree Clearing pic 2](#)

[Electrical Line Easement Tree Clearing pic 3](#)

[Electrical Line Easement Tree Clearing pic 4](#)