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County replacing sod in medians with low-maintenance alternatives

Sarasota County Road and Bridge has begun replacing sod in roadway medians with low-maintenance ground cover including Florida native plants, shell, pine bark and other alternative materials. The first street targeted is Proctor Road, where crews are placing shell, pine bark and muhly grass this week.

Road and Bridge Manager Gary Spraggins said the plan is to replace the mowed sod with alternative ground cover on all raised medians, especially those on major arterial roadways, by Sept. 30. While the primary reason for the switch is to save on mowing costs, the changeover supports the county's commitment to sustainable landscaping and reduced fossil fuel use, he said. An estimated savings of \$800,000 this year will allow the county to meet the increasing demand to add other mowed parcels to its \$2.4 million annual mowing contract while keeping costs flat, he added.

The Road and Bridge division is still exploring different types of alternatives to mowed sod such as mulch, shredded tires and native or adaptive, resource-conserving plants, Spraggins said. The muhly grass that is planted in Proctor Road medians grows up to 4 feet tall and has extreme tolerance to drought and flooding, according to the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service. It produces pinkish purple blooms in late fall.

Using Florida native plants such as muhly grass instead of mowed sod helps to reduce pollution and the demand for non-renewable resources. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, a push mower emits as much hourly pollution as 11 cars and a riding mower as much as 34 cars. Additionally, native plants also work much better as a carbon sink than traditional mowed grass due to their extensive root systems and increased ability to retain and store water.

Among other streets targeted soon for the mowed sod alternatives are Cattlemen Road from Proctor to just north of the Colonial Oaks neighborhood, and McIntosh Road from Bee Ridge Road south to Wilkinson Road, according to Spraggins. In the south section of the county, Center Road, Dearborn Street and Colonia Lane are targeted. Roads currently under construction such as the section of Bahia Vista Street from Cattlemen to McIntosh roads also would get the sod-free medians.

The Road and Bridge division is working with Urban Forestry to preserve the health of existing trees in the medians and find the most suitable alternatives to mowed sod for use around the trees, Spraggins said.

For more information about roadway medians, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for the Road and Bridge division.