

# City of Iowa City

## MEMORANDUM

From: Rick Fosse, Public Works Director *R&F*

Date: April 10, 2008

RE: Alley Maintenance

Spring rains and the frost going out of the ground are triggers for complaints about alleys. This gives rise to questions about the City's policies regarding these transportation relics that may be making a come back in some new subdivision designs.

Attached are a couple of documents related to alley policies and procedures. The first is the information that appears on the City's web site regarding alley maintenance. The second is a City policy regarding alleys drafted in July of 2000. This policy was drafted for two reasons. First, to establish standards by which alleys could be reintroduced into subdivision design, specifically for the Peninsula Neighborhood. Second, to establish in writing the past practices of the City with regard to the maintenance of alleys in older neighborhoods.

The documents noted above do not address methods and policies for improvements or reconstruction of alleys. There are five options for this.

1. Special Assessment – Prior to the early 1990's the standard method to pave or repave an alley was by special assessment. The City designed and constructed the improvements and assessed 100% of the cost to the adjoining property owners. During the late 1980's and early 1990's special assessment projects in Iowa City were phased out as a method of project financing based on their unpopularity with those who were being assessed.
2. Cost Sharing – Under this option, the City will design and construct alley improvements and the adjoining property owners will contribute a portion of the cost. This method has been offered in a number of locations, but only implemented once, along the north side of the New Pioneer Coop. Cost sharing worked in this instance because there was only one property owner to work with. In other areas where this has been tried, it has not been possible to get all the adjoining property owners to commit.
3. Private Project Built to City Standards – Under this option, the property owners could organize and finance a project to reconstruct their alley to city standards. After such a project, the City would maintain the pavement for the duration of the design life, usually twenty to thirty years. The advantage of this option is that it would avoid certain expenses that are unique to the special assessment process dictated by the State Code. To date, this method has not been used in a residential setting because of the difficulty in getting all property owners to agree and participate.
4. Private Project Not Built to City Standards – Under this option, the property owners can organize and finance a project to improve their alley, but not to full city standards. This type of project usually consists of a few inches of asphalt. Because of the limited durability of this option, the City does not maintain the pavement upon completion of the project. This obligation remains with the

Some of these projects have been successful while others have resulted in disputes between property owners about the work that was done.

5. City Project funded by the City – Under this option the project would be designed and funded exclusively by the City. I believe the only locations this method has been used is a few blocks in the central business district as part of Urban Renewal.

In summary, it is safe to say that the City does not commit the level of resources to alleys that adjoining property owners desire. While this is nothing new, the level of dissatisfaction is growing for two reasons. First, as time passes alleys that were paved long ago degrade into a condition that is no longer serviceable, adding to our list of unsatisfied residents. Second, when the City stopped assessing projects, alley improvements have essentially come to a standstill. In short, the number of alleys in poor condition is growing faster than they are being remedied.

The philosophy of the City's alley policies is based on the principle that alleys serve only the adjoining property owners and, as such, are the financial responsibility of only the adjoining property owners. However, cooperation amongst property owners has not proven to be an effective mechanism to fund alley maintenance or improvements. Even with City facilitation, cooperation is rare. The City's limited funds from Road Use Tax are reserved for streets and other components of the broader transportation system. Iowa's Road Use Tax has been fixed since 1989 without adjustment for inflation which has made it difficult to keep pace with our maintenance obligations. To dedicate additional resources to alley maintenance and improvements, it will be necessary to find a new revenue source or divert funds from existing street maintenance programs.

## CITY POLICY REGARDING ALLEYS

July 28, 2000

On June 7, 2000, the City Manager, Director of Public Works, Director of Planning and the Senior Planner met to discuss the appropriate ownership and long term maintenance responsibilities for alleys in the Peninsula neighborhood and the City's policy for alleys in new subdivisions and older neighborhoods. That discussion resulted in the following policy:

- A developer will have an option of public or private ownership of alleys provided certain conditions are met.
- All alleys designated for public ownership must be paved with PCC to a depth of 7" and a pavement surface of 16' within a 20' right-of-way and provided with an appropriate drainage system. The drainage system must consist of an inverted crown and may have a center drain graded to enable use of the street storm sewer system.
- Private alleys must be paved, but may use asphalt at a standard of 4 inches minimum depth and 16 feet wide within a 20' wide public access easement. Garbage pickup will not be provided on asphalt alleys, except at the City's discretion. Private alleys will not be maintained or plowed by the City.
- Paved public alleys will be maintained by the City throughout the design life of the pavement. Snow removal is the responsibility of abutting property owners or a homeowners' association.
- No sumps (low spots) will be permitted in the grade of public or private alleys without a stormwater easement and adequate drainage swale designed to convey a 100-year rain event assuming the storm sewer is blocked.
- Public alleys will not necessarily function as service alleys; the City will, at its discretion, determine the appropriate routes for garbage pickup. A clear zone may be required to enable garbage pickup service on alleys. Garbage pickup may be provided on private alleys, at the City's discretion and only with a properly executed agreement between the developer/abutting property owners and the City.
- Existing platted alleys may be improved by the abutting property owners, at their cost, to the standard for new alleys noted above with the same provisions for public alleys. Unimproved public alleys will not be maintained or plowed by the City except as currently provided for (i.e. the City will spread, grade and roll an alley with rock provided by abutting residents). Improvement of an existing alley requires the consent/cooperation of abutting property owners; the City will not mediate a disagreement among the owners.
- Intersecting alleys will be required to meet additional standards for width and turning radii.