

New ordinance would allow painting of public streets



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Streets don't necessarily have to be black or shades of gray. Or so says an ordinance proposed by Near East Side Ald. Marsha Rummel.

The proposed ordinance, which was introduced at the May 7 City Council meeting, outlines a procedure for gaining

city approval to paint artwork on public streets.

If approved, recognized community organizations such as neighborhood associations, business associations or nonprofit groups could submit designs to the city and apply for a permit to paint a street in their area.

As part of the application, the group would have to submit a petition indicating approval from at least 60 percent residents, businesses and non-residential properties within a 200-foot radius of the proposed location.

Rummel got the idea for drafting the ordinance after learning about the Portland, Ore.-based nonprofit City Repair. The group sponsors a program called "Intersection Repair," where community members paint an intersection to give it a sense of place and create a public square.

In 2008 City Repair co-founder Mark Lakeman put on a workshop at the Goodman Community Center that included chalking part of the adjacent bike trail. Rummel said she wasn't a part of the collaborative public art project, but received very positive feedback about the community-building experience.

"It helps neighbors come together and create a sense of place in their neighborhood. There's something about public art that brings people together," she said.

The designs would be limited to decorative patterns and could not include text, numerals, symbols or elements that mimic traffic control markings or make the painting distracting to drivers. The paintings would be restricted to streets and intersections with local uses and speed limits under 25 miles per hour.

The ordinance also provides assurances for the city that hold the design's applicant responsible for maintenance of the painting and requires them to have insurance.

"You can't just say you want to come in and do this. It needs to be maintained over time. Paint fades. It needs to be repainted from time to time, just as we go and repaint traffic

lines," said Arthur Ross, the city's pedestrian-bicycle coordinator.

Ross said he's researched the topic off and on since 2008. He has consulted traffic engineering staff in Portland on the issue who said they had no problems with their ordinance and have even expanded it to include streets with more traffic.

"We don't look at it as traffic calming. It's not going to slow or divert traffic. ... What it really is is a community building activity. It gets people out of their houses and working on something together," Ross said.

Karin Wolf, city arts program administrator, said people have inquired about similar projects in the past, but nothing could be done without an ordinance to allow it.

"You see chalk festivals in other cities and all that could be legal now," she said. "It's another canvas that is possible."