

HOAs, residents clash over artificial turf during drought

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Dos Vientos Ranch homeowner John Dwight wants to install artificial turf in his front yard to cut down on his water use during California's severe drought.

"The goal is to be responsive to our environmental concerns," said the retired residential real estate mortgage broker. "Hands down. That's a given."

But his homeowners association — like some others in Ventura County and the rest of the state — isn't allowing him.

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"At this point in time, we don't permit turf to be installed in front yards," said Michael Bubman, president of the Sedona Maintenance Corp., the association for Dwight's upscale gated community, Sedona at Dos Vientos Ranch, in Thousand Oaks. It is permitted in rear yards of the community's 69 homes.

Synthetic grass, which doesn't require watering, has seen a boon during the state's prolonged drought. That's likely to continue in light of Gov. Jerry Brown's April 1 executive order mandating water-use reductions for the first time in California's history. Water officials say landscape irrigation can account for more than half of the average household's water use.

But Bubman said the association has a number of concerns about artificial turf, including the quality of its installation.

"Do the installers know what they're doing?" he said. "Because those installations can be done

poorly so it creates additional costs to the association in terms of monitoring or supervising.

“We want to keep up a good positive look to the community,” he said.

Bubman said the association is not oblivious to the drought.

He said it recently received notice from its water provider, California American Water, that it needs to cut usage by 32 percent.

“But artificial turf is not the only alternative to grass,” he said. For instance, there are drought-resistance plants, which the association permits.

“We understand we have to do our part during the drought too,” said Bubman, who has artificial turf in his backyard. “But there may come a time when we’re not in a drought. So we want to make sure that we’re considering not only the drought, but what happens afterward.”

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PROPOSED LEGISLATION

The state may soon force homeowners associations’ hands.

Last month, the Assembly passed a bill that would forbid associations from fining residents who install artificial grass. AB349 could be voted on by the Senate this month, then sent to Brown’s desk for his signature, said Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, D-San Diego, who is sponsoring the bill.

“We’ve heard from a lot of homeowners who say, ‘I’d really like to put in artificial turf, but I can’t even get my HOA to look at it,’” she said Friday. “There’s nothing fake about this historic drought, and we need to be embracing all real solutions for conservation. This is one more tool.”

Similar legislation was vetoed in 2010 and 2011, though Brown last year signed another Gonzalez bill ending homeowner association bans of drought-tolerant landscaping.

Bubman said his understanding of the bill is that it would still allow homeowners associations to set standards for artificial turf in front yards.

He said the association may yet allow Dwight to install the synthetic grass.

The association is surveying its members to gauge their feelings on the issue. If a majority of the homeowners say they're OK with artificial turf in the community's front yards, the association would change its position, Bubman said.

"Absolutely," he said. "We represent the homeowners and if the homeowners want to do that, then we'll establish a standard for installation in front yards."

Bubman said homeowners associations have been unfairly characterized in media coverage of the artificial turf debate.

"I've seen a lot of press and a lot of statements in various communities where they are sort of portraying associations as the bad guys," he said. "But we just want what our community wants."

FAKE GRASS PROPONENT

The green-conscious Dwight, 63, has long been an advocate of artificial turf, which he had installed at his previous residence at The Meadows at Lake Sherwood.

"It took a while convincing that HOA to let me do it there too," he said with a laugh.

He also had solar panels there, just like he has at his home at Sedona at Dos Vientos Ranch, where he has been living since October 2009. Dwight also drives an electric car.

Besides not requiring water, artificial turf looks better than many people's grass yards, Dwight thinks.

"Really, almost anywhere in any community you look at, almost every property with grass has dead patches, yellow patches, holes," he said. "The artificial turf doesn't seem to have those kinds of problems. It just looks like what you would want a yard to look like all the time: nice and green and healthy."

While he awaits the association's decision, he and his wife, Elena, are having a landscaper put in drought-tolerant plants. He's leaving a dirt portion of his front yard empty for his hoped-for synthetic grass.

"I have that area on hold right now," he said.

NO TO ARTIFICIAL TURF

