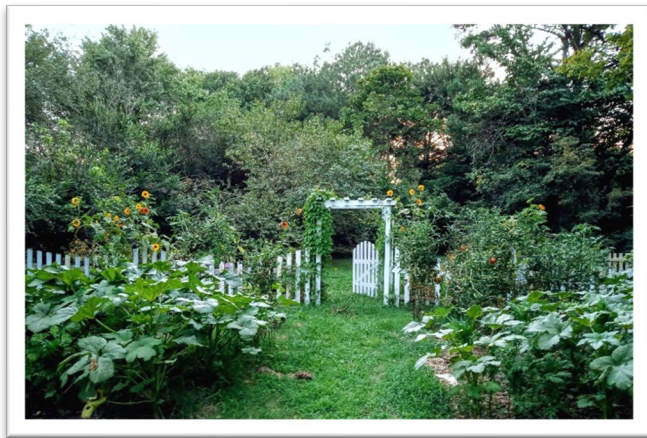




How Our Town Created a Pollinator-Friendly Property Maintenance Ordinance (Part 2)

By Bonny McLaughlin Stitt

My involvement in West Fork City politics began with a phone call from a friend on December 27, just as I was preparing for a large family Christmas event. “Bonny, have you heard about the December City Council meeting? The mayor’s new proposal to revise the property maintenance ordinance? No? Well, you should probably watch the video clip of it that’s been posted on the garden club’s Facebook page. The mayor is proposing some pretty strict new guidelines for gardeners.” As I watched the video, I became increasingly alarmed. If this new ordinance passed, my plans for a more wildlife-friendly yard would become illegal overnight. And even if I gave up my new garden dreams, my current yard was already in violation of the proposed new ordinance.



My vegetable garden, visible from the street, was in violation of the mayor’s proposed new ordinance

The previous spring, I was bold enough to establish an attractively maintained vegetable garden in the part of my yard that’s visible from the street. That garden bed was in violation of the mayor’s proposed ordinance, as were several of my other garden beds. I also knew of other West Fork residents’ yards whose garden beds comprised more than 25% of their yard space, so their yards would also become illegal. But arguing to leave the ordinance as it had been for

decades was no longer an option. The man with the wildflower garden right in the center of town had agitated city leadership enough that they seemed determined to make a change.

I felt both frightened and trapped. I knew I needed to respond to this situation, but I hate conflict, and I was afraid of getting involved in the local political scene. In my 25 years of living in this town, I had never even written a letter to the City Council. I finally got up my courage and composed a respectful letter to the mayor and to each member of the City Council.

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After receiving my letter, the mayor called me. But ironically, I missed the call because I was on the phone with my best friend, crying and asking for her prayers about this very issue! With my heart pounding and my hands shaking, I called the mayor back. This would be my first time speaking personally to the mayor about an issue facing our town.

To my relief, we had a friendly conversation. The mayor explained his goal with his proposed ordinance: to allow for gardens but also address the need for weed control. I asked him what he thought of my alternative idea: to get a group of gardeners together to study the issues before any ordinance came to the City Council for a vote. (I was trying to buy some time to get the word out to other gardeners in town, and to get more of them involved in the issue.) But to my surprise, the mayor took my request to the next level. He asked me to form a committee to write up revisions to the ordinance and bring it before the City Council.

Under the circumstances, what could I say but yes? I told the mayor I'd like to involve both of the garden clubs in town, and he suggested I have a smaller working/voting committee and then get input from a larger group. He also offered to attend any committee meetings if desired. We agreed on a timeline; the revisions would be presented to the City Council by me and my (yet-to-be-formed) committee at their May 2023 meeting. So, in January, instead of voting on the mayor's ordinance as planned, the City Council approved me to form a committee. I immediately contacted both of the West Fork Garden clubs to let them know what was at stake and to ask for their support. It was not hard to find local gardeners who were interested and concerned. By the end of January, the committee was sitting in my living room, drinking tea and eating cookies - seven smart, savvy, brave, environmentally aware, and caring women. It was a magic number and a wonderful team!



Another front-yard-turned-wildflower-meadow here in West Fork after the new ordinance was approved

At our first meeting, we talked strategy. We wanted to allow gardeners the freedom to create pollinator and wildlife-friendly yards, while also addressing concerns about overgrown and neglected yards. We needed enough specifics to allow code enforcement when necessary. With all of this in mind, we brainstormed our goals and wrote them on butcher paper:

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- Change the ordinance language to be more positive. Rather than keeping the focus on preventing “rats and vermin” as the existing town ordinance stated, we wanted the focus to be on supporting wildlife and pollinators and protecting the river that runs through the heart of our town.
- Emphasize gardeners’ rights to create natural landscapes in our yards, while also assuring that they would be intentional and well-maintained.
- Meet with both local garden clubs and the mayor ahead of the City Council meeting to make sure both sides were happy with what we’d written.

A document that was especially helpful to us was the *National Wildlife Federation’s Guide to Model Landscape Ordinances*. This document features links to wildlife-friendly property maintenance ordinances in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Austin, Texas. We read carefully through these model ordinances and highlighted all of the words and phrases we thought might be useful to us in rewriting our ordinance. Our strategy was to simply add some of these words and phrases to West Fork’s existing ordinance and remove words we wanted to eliminate from it.

Once we had a first draft, we met with each of our West Fork Garden clubs to carefully go over the wording with them, to take note of the changes they recommended, and to invite them to support us at the City Council meeting. I also met individually with several of our more influential and outspoken community members to show them what we’d written and see if I could prevent any potential dissent at the City Council meeting when we presented our final draft.

Finally, we arranged a meeting with the mayor, for which I made a colorful PowerPoint presentation explaining what I had come to understand about pollinators and their needs, and to which our committee brought tea and cookies. Food never hurts to soften a potentially controversial meeting. To our delight, we had a very congenial meeting, and the mayor only made one small suggestion for a change which did not impact the overall trajectory of our ordinance.

In April, we brought our document to the City Council meeting for a first reading, and with lots of gardeners in attendance and the groundwork we had already laid to get some influential community members on board, everything went fairly smoothly. The next two months were spent waiting for the city attorney to adjust the wording to ensure compliance with state laws and to protect the city.

The city attorney made a few changes that we weren’t thrilled about, but in the end, we decided we could live with them. He assured us that our ordinance was, to his knowledge,

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the most cutting-edge ordinance in the state of Arkansas in terms of its protections for pollinators and gardeners.

On June 13, 2023, the City Council was unanimous in voting our ordinance into law. [You can read the new ordinance in full here.](#)

I can't tell you what a happy moment that was for me, and what a huge relief! Now I can resurrect my dreams for a yard that Doug Tallamy would be proud of, and we can work together as a community to try to make our yards into important pieces of the Homegrown National Park.

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