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INFORMATION REQUEST (IR) - Residential Lot Grading

Requested by: Councillor Hughes

Date of Request: July 15, 2026

Date Response Due: August 15, 2026

Confidential Response: No

QUESTION

That Administration provide information regarding the City's current approach to residential lot grading, including:

The rationale for requiring rough grade approval but not final grade approval for residential properties.

The measures in place to ensure that finished landscaping, including topsoil placement and compaction, maintains the approved drainage design after rough grade approval has been issued.

The recourse available to homeowners when drainage issues arise as a result of neighbouring properties that have not been landscaped or graded in accordance with the approved lot grading plan, including the City's authority to investigate and enforce compliance.

A comparison of St. Albert's residential lot grading requirements with those of comparable Alberta municipalities, including whether they require final grade approval.

The number, nature, and outcomes of residential drainage complaints related to lot grading or landscaping received by the City over the past five years.

Whether Administration has previously considered implementing a mandatory final residential lot grading approval process, and if so, the rationale for maintaining the current approach.

The operational, financial, and regulatory implications of implementing a mandatory final residential lot grading approval process for new residential developments, including any required amendments to City bylaws, policies, or standards.

RESPONSE

The City has experienced record levels of precipitation and sustained high-water conditions in 2026, resulting in a significant increase in surface drainage complaints. As a result of the record precipitation, increased settlement has occurred, particularly in newer developments. In some cases, this settlement has created negative drainage conditions (flowing toward house foundations), leading to flooding issues for homeowners.

As outlined in the Surface Drainage Bylaw, homeowners and builders are responsible for always maintaining positive drainage away from their homes, including during construction. Proper lot grading and drainage are essential to reducing the risk of water-related damage.

Residential Lot Grading - Current Approach

The City's current residential lot grading review process focuses on rough grade approval only. Rough grading is reviewed because it is directly connected to the overall neighbourhood engineering design and is necessary to ensure that surface drainage functions as intended. The approved clay surface grades establish the drainage pattern for each lot and direct stormwater runoff toward common swales, roadways, or stormwater management facilities. The lot grading must be consistent with the City's Municipal Engineering Standards.

Lot grading requirements are set out in Section 3.1.3 of the Municipal Engineering Standards. Properties must also comply with the applicable Municipal Engineering Standard details, including Details 7.9, 7.10, 7.13, 7.14, 7.15, or 7.16, depending on the lot configuration and building design. The [Municipal Engineering Standards <https://stalbert.ca/dev/engineering/standards/>](https://stalbert.ca/dev/engineering/standards/) provide the details in Appendix A.

The review process generally follows these steps:

1. The builder grades the lot after house construction and retains a professional land surveyor to survey the lot and confirm the grades adjacent to the home and along the property lines.
2. The surveyor prepares a lot grading certificate confirming whether the lot has been graded in accordance with the approved design and submits the certificate to the City.
3. City inspectors complete a review of the submitted lot grading certificate in comparison to the overall design (typically within 5-7 business days of receipt). A visual site verification is then completed to confirm that the lot generally matches the approved grading design and that positive drainage is directed away from the home toward common swales, roadways, or stormwater management facilities.
4. An inspection report is then issued to the builder confirming approval or identifying any deficiencies that must be corrected before approval can be granted. Once rough grade

approval is issued, the approved rough grade should not be altered and is noted as such in the report.

The information request included seven primary questions, with nested sub-questions for many. The following response addresses those questions.

I. Rationale for Not Requiring Final Grade Approval

The City's rationale for not requiring final grade approval is based on several factors:

First, the overall neighbourhood drainage design is established through the approved rough grade, which is based on clay elevations. These approved clay grades form the basis for the engineering design and drainage calculations for the neighbourhood. From the City's perspective, the primary objective is to ensure that the approved drainage system functions as designed, including directing surface runoff to common swales, roadways, or stormwater management facilities.

Second, final landscaping is located on private property and is the responsibility of the homeowner. A maximum 6" of topsoil can be uniformly applied over the entire lot area to maintain approved drainage patterns and property line elevations. Landscaping, including topsoil placement, sod, planting beds, and other surface treatments, can be changed by homeowners over time. Private landscaping does not currently require a development permit under the Land Use Bylaw, and the City does not regulate every landscaping change made on private residential property. This private landscaping can, and often does, change the grade around the home, but is ultimately the responsibility of the homeowner.

Third, implementing a final grade approval process would require additional resources, including staff/staff time, administration, inspections, and a process to review individual landscaping designs. If such a program were expanded beyond new residential construction to include landscaping changes on existing private properties, the scope would increase significantly.

II. Current Measures to Maintain Drainage After Rough Grade Approval

Once rough grade approval has been issued, responsibility for maintaining positive drainage shifts to the homeowner. This includes ensuring that final landscaping, topsoil placement, compaction, downspouts, and any future changes to the property continue to direct surface drainage away from the home and toward the approved drainage routes.

Settlement can occur after clay grades are placed and compacted, particularly following heavy or prolonged precipitation. In some cases, it may be beneficial for homeowners to allow the clay grade to settle for a season before completing final landscaping. This may help reduce future settlement and minimize the need for rework.

Where neighbouring lots are at different stages of development, unfinished lots may sit lower than adjacent landscaped properties. However, common swales must continue to function as intended and direct drainage toward roadways or stormwater management facilities without adversely affecting

neighbouring properties.

Landscape settlement is the homeowner's responsibility and is not typically covered under new home warranty programs. The City does not collect a landscaping security or credit from homeowners to ensure completion of private property landscaping. However, developers may collect an architectural control or landscaping fee to help ensure landscaping is completed in accordance with subdivision or developer requirements. See Lot Grading FAQs for more details:

[<https://stalbert.ca/home/property/drainage/grading/>](https://stalbert.ca/home/property/drainage/grading/)

III. Homeowner Recourse and Enforcement

If a homeowner suspects that overland drainage is coming from their neighbour's property, the first step would be to discuss the concern with the neighbour. If a solution is not able to be achieved, homeowners can contact the City. The City may then investigate the reported issue under the Surface Drainage Bylaw. The typical process includes reviewing the concern, advising the property owner of any required corrective action, allowing time for voluntary compliance, and considering enforcement if the issue remains unresolved. The Surface Drainage Bylaw was approved by Council in 2015. Some properties developed before approval of the Bylaw may have drainage patterns that do not align with current expectations, particularly in areas with significant elevation changes where runoff may historically have crossed neighbouring properties.

The Land Use Bylaw requires residential lots to be landscaped within two years of development permit issuance. The Community Standards Bylaw may also apply where unfinished landscaping creates nuisance conditions, such as exposed soil, dust, or dirt. In these cases, the City may use available enforcement tools to seek compliance. Overall, complaints related to unfinished landscaping are low. Over the past 10 years, only one significant case has been identified, involving a property in Oakmont where landscaping remained incomplete for a number of years.

IV. Municipal Comparison Review

A review of comparable Alberta municipalities indicates that many require both rough grade and final grade inspections for residential properties. St. Albert's current approach differs by limiting municipal approval to the rough grade stage which is the base design layer for the lot, and the final landscaping functions as a cosmetic layer and treated as the homeowner's responsibility on private property.

V. Residential Lot Complaints

Administration tracks drainage-related inquiries/complaints and their outcomes. Between 2021 and 2026, the majority of inquiries were determined to have no grading-related merit. Most concerns were associated with ongoing construction activity, downspout locations, or drainage issues originating on the complainant's own property rather than from a neighbouring property. Based on the tracked complaints received and their outcomes for both new and established neighbourhoods, the results are summarized in the table below.

	Inquiries received	Valid complaints dealing with lot grading	Escalated complaints to MES	Comments
New builds 2021-2026	16	0	No grade issues discovered	Issues that came out of inquiries were due to downspout locations, not grading. Issues were corrected after a letter was issued by City.
Mature existing areas 2021-2026	135	0	No, grade issues from neighbouring properties	Most issues came from downspout locations or settlement on the complainant's own property

Many complaints were found to be unrelated to grading deficiencies and were instead linked to normal construction activities or drainage conditions occurring on the complainant's property. In established neighbourhoods, most complaints involve homes constructed before 2015, prior to the implementation of the Surface Drainage Bylaw. These properties can present unique challenges because they were not originally designed with overland drainage considerations between neighbouring properties in mind. Historically, surface drainage flowing across neighbouring properties was a common and accepted drainage practice throughout much of St. Albert.

VI. Consideration of Final Lot Grading requirement

Administration has previously considered whether to require final grade approval. However, based on the approved rough grade process, current complaint history, available resources, and the private-property nature of final landscaping, the additional cost and administrative burden have not been considered proportionate to the expected benefit.

VII. Implementation Considerations

As noted, Administration has evaluated the option of requiring a final grade inspection and approval as part of the residential development process. The primary benefit of this approach would be greater alignment with practices adopted by many neighbouring municipalities, while also providing additional assurance that final lot grades are constructed in accordance with the approved neighbourhood drainage design established through the rough grade approval process.

However, this approach presents several challenges. These include the costs associated with implementing and administering the program, increased costs for homeowners and builders, and the need for additional staffing resources to undertake inspections, compliance reviews, and permit administration. Given the City's existing rough grade inspection process and the low number of substantiated drainage complaints, Administration has determined that a final grade approval process would provide limited additional value relative to the costs required to implement and maintain the

service.

To implement a final grade approval process at the current level of development activity, Administration estimates that two additional full-time positions would be required. Currently, the rough grade inspection program is supported by one full-time employee and two engineering students who carry out inspections and administrative functions. The addition of two full-time positions is estimated to cost approximately \$300,000 annually. To recover these costs, an amendment to the Master Rates Bylaw would be required to establish a final grade inspection fee. Based on an average of approximately 500 new residential builds per year, a fee of roughly \$600 per new build would be required to achieve full cost recovery.

From Administration's perspective, the costs of implementation, ongoing operational requirements, and the potential impact on private property rights outweigh the expected benefits of introducing a mandatory final grade approval process. As a result, Administration does not recommend adding final grade inspections to the current development review process.

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