



**Michigan Association of Planning  
A Chapter of the American Planning Association**

*Excerpted from the MSPO Community Planning Handbook*

## **Screening/Buffering/Landscaping**

### **Description**

A screen or buffer is a natural or man-made feature which separates land uses. Screening, buffering, and landscaping requirements address visual, light, and sound impacts. Screens and buffers can enhance community appearance, reduce land use conflicts by separating incompatible land uses, improve the appearance of parking areas and public rights-of-way, minimize soil erosion, and reduce stormwater runoff.

Screening requirements focus more on the visual impacts of the use, and buffering focuses more on light and sounds, although the two are interrelated. Screens could be fences, walls, trees, or shrubs placed to help blend the use into the surroundings or block it completely. Buffers could be strips of land or water, hills or berms, a clump of trees, or other landscaped features. Berms are mounds of landscaped earth and are especially useful along roadways to reduce the glare of headlights and noise from traffic. Small, landscaped berms are also used to enhance the appearance of commercial corridors.

Screening, buffering, and landscaping requirements are included in the zoning ordinance and are administered during site plan review (see Site Plan Review technique). Landscaping requirements address size, spacing, quality, composition, installation, and maintenance. Berm standards address slope, landscaping, and width of the crown. Fencing and screening standards address height, setbacks, materials, traffic safety, and emergency access. Fencing and screening are typically required for outdoor storage, mechanical equipment, roof-mounted equipment, utility substations, side and rear lot lines of nonresidential uses, and swimming pools. Walls made of brick or stone can be attractive and effective buffers if ordinance standards are good, but they are also the most expensive. Therefore, most ordinances allow a choice between landscaped buffers, fences, and solid walls where screening is required.

## **Planning Considerations**

Appropriate screening, landscaping, and buffering will vary according to the characteristics of the site and the compatibility of the land use with surrounding uses. Therefore, the regulatory approach should permit a range of optimal landscaping materials and fences at a variety of heights. The officials charged with site plan review should also be given some flexibility (within limits) to determine the type and size of screen or buffer which is most compatible with surrounding land uses. This is especially important for fences, which can detract from the appearance of the site if improperly planned. The review body should also have the authority to waive screening or buffering requirements where they serve no useful purpose, or to delay installation under limited circumstances. Where trees are the desired buffer or screen, spacing and size standards should be set so trees are large enough and planted close enough to serve as buffers. A performance guarantee should be collected to insure that required screening, buffer, or landscaping will be installed (see Performance Guarantee technique).

### **Advantages**

- Enhances community character and appearance.
- Protects or improves property values.
- Reduces land use conflicts.
- Encourages preservation of existing trees.

### **Disadvantages**

- Effectiveness depends on follow-up inspections to ensure landscaping materials and berms are of the required size and type, and are properly installed and maintained.

### **Limitations**

- If the community does not require that landscaping be maintained in a living condition, then its value is lost if it dies and is not replaced.