

How to Develop a Stormwater Utility Fee



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Oklahoma Water Resources Board

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Stormwater Management: The Forgotten Utility

Absorbent soils and lands in a community are gradually replaced by less permeable surfaces, such as parking lots and driveways. Water that once settled in hollows, meandered around stream curves, and seeped and soaked into the ground, now speeds downhill, spills into low areas, and overfills clogged ditches. As a result, flooding occurs more frequently. Contingent upon any comprehensive plan to control flooding is a strategy for managing stormwaters. Oklahoma's progressive cities regard stormwater management as a service they owe their customers. As a result, an increasing number of cities are passing ordinances that recognize this "forgotten utility." Cities often include stormwater drainage fees in monthly water/sewer bills. The fees are used to create dependable, dedicated funds for maintaining stormwater removal systems. Additionally, this fee can be used for the treatment of stormwater pollution to meet EPA standards before it is discharged in rivers, lakes, and streams.



Why do we need a stormwater or drainage fee?

The fee is necessary to maintain and improve the facilities that safely carry stormwaters away. It can be used for the following:

- *Inspecting and repairing storm drains and pump stations.*
- *Removing silt and debris from ditches, creeks, and streams.*
- *Improving detention basins.*
- *Developing a master drainage plan.*
- *Constructing small projects.*
- *Complying with local floodplain management regulations.*

Maintaining the floodplain.

Stormwater Utility Fee Q & A

Which residents should be responsible for paying a stormwater utility fee?

Stormwater runs off every property in the city. Residents on both hillsides and lowlands contribute to runoff. Everyone creates the problem, so everyone should help in its solution.

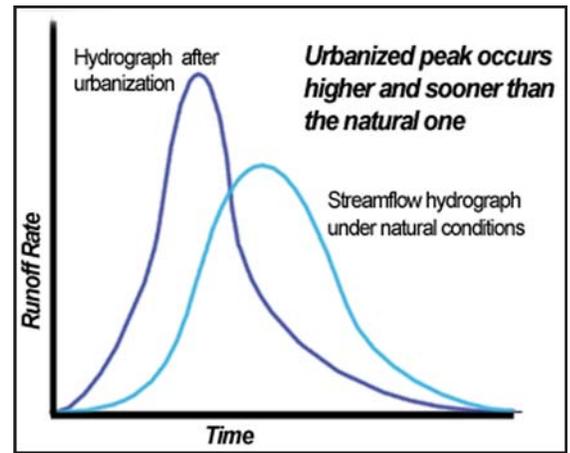
What is the difference between the stormwater drainage fee and the charge for sewer service on my utility bill?

The stormwater drainage fee is entirely separate from the sewer (wastewater) system fee. Stormwater drainage consists of a network of ditches, streams, and underground pipes that safely carry away excess water or runoff. The wastewater system disposes of water that goes down household drains from sinks, tubs, toilets, and washing machines.

How much would a stormwater utility fee add to my bill?

The cost of abating flood damage caused by inadequate stormwater drainage systems is affordable if it is allotted equitably among all citizens in a community. However, public and private costs can be substantial when floodwaters swamp debris-choked creeks and channels, clogged and collapsed sewers, and neglected pump stations.

- Tulsa set its utility fee based on essential costs, and then apportioned them among all homes and businesses. Homeowners pay a stormwater utility fee of \$3.10 per month for every 2,650 square feet of impervious surface on their properties. Tulsa's program generates approximately \$13 million each year for operation and maintenance of its stormwater program and the construction of small flood mitigation projects.
- Oklahoma City's stormwater utility fees are based on water meter size, but for all residential structures and most small businesses the cost is \$3.10 per month. Oklahoma City does not use an equivalent service unit due to its complexity and potential increased costs to the City.
- Edmond attaches a monthly drainage fee of \$2 to most residential utility bills (based on a rate of \$2 per 10,000 square feet of impervious area), with a maximum monthly charge of \$100 for commercial and industrial sites.
- Bixby, a community of over 13,000 near Tulsa, created a stormwater management fee through Ordinance 550. This ordinance requires each equivalent service unit (2,650 square feet of impervious area) to pay a monthly charge of \$2.00. The fee is part of each property's monthly water/utility bill. Proceeds are deposited into Bixby's stormwater drainage fund.



Urbanization significantly increases runoff. Peak rates of stormwater flow increase as vegetation is removed and the natural landscape is altered, replacing slow draining wetlands, depressions, meanders and gullies with paved areas, fast draining



Stormwater Control

Control of stormwater is necessary because development on higher ground can increase flooding, siltation and erosion. Changes in the natural balance require compensations in the form of well planned and maintained drainage systems.

Tulsa public works officials estimate that of the 6,000 buildings damaged in the Memorial Day Flood of 1984, up to 1,000 would have been spared if the city's stormwater system had functioned properly.

Does a Stormwater Management Fee affect eligibility in the NFIP?

A stormwater management fee helps communities remain eligible to receive the Federal Emergency Management Agency's insurance and disaster assistance benefits. If your community is enrolled in the National Flood Insurance Program, FEMA requires maintenance of the carrying capacity of any modified channel (including a bridge over the channel, a concrete-lined ditch or a straightened stream segment, or other alteration to increase the channel's ability to carry floodwaters). These channels must be kept open by cleaning out excessive vegetative growth, silt, and debris.

How do we fund a stormwater program?

Cities need reliable, long-term funding for their stormwater programs--money safe from shifts in political winds or changes in local administrations. The recommended first step in seeking durable funding is to visit with program administrators in cities that have model programs, such as Tulsa, Lawton, Oklahoma City, Edmond, and Bixby. Citizens in some communities have approved a sales tax earmarked for the drainage program. Others have passed an ordinance permitting the addition of a stormwater fee to their regular monthly utility bill. In other areas, city councils have mandated the fee.



How should a city gain citizen support for the stormwater fee concept?

Naturally, cities that have experienced frequent flooding will find more support for the program. From the beginning, city officials should solicit input from utility users and seek citizen acceptance through public information, education and awareness programs.

Clearly, the answer to solving many persistent flooding problems is a comprehensive stormwater management plan that encompasses the entire watershed. Floodplain management and stormwater management are interconnected, so all strategies should target the solution of flooding problems. An integrated plan includes prevention and control of flooding by structural and nonstructural means, community participation in the National Flood Insurance Program, and hazard mitigation strategies.

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