



From THE DESK of

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Over the last two years, Integrated Science & Engineering, Inc. (ISE) has been assisting the City of Suwanee in analyzing the city's stormwater infrastructure and making funding recommendations. As part of the process, a 14-member Citizen's Stakeholder Committee studied the stormwater-related issues and recommended that the city consider a stormwater utility. Hope Larisey led the study on behalf of ISE.

WHAT IS A STORMWATER UTILITY?

For most people, stormwater raises few concerns unless they are driving through flooded streets or experiencing flooding in their yards or homes. Unfortunately, stormwater can also contribute to less apparent problems relating to our environment. When it rains, our community's water resources are threatened. Stormwater runoff picks up debris, chemicals, dirt, and other pollutants and flows directly into lakes, streams, or wetlands. If it enters a storm drain, the runoff is eventually discharged, untreated, into our local creeks and streams. **In a previous city newsletter article, Suwanee Public Works Director Bob Dean discussed the impacts of rainwater and the city's stormwater infrastructure.**

Scan here to read Bob Dean's article on Stormwater Utility!



As communities grow, stormwater management becomes increasingly important for a variety of reasons. Paved or impervious surfaces – such as driveways, rooftops, sidewalks, streets, and buildings – prevent stormwater from soaking into the ground. These changes alter the flow of surface water, resulting in an increase in the volume and velocity of runoff, as well as an increase in pollutants that end up in our natural water resources.

Polluted stormwater runoff has become the nation's greatest threat to clean water and can have many adverse effects on plants, fish, animals, and people.

Management of stormwater runoff is an increasingly important responsibility for local governments. Regulatory requirements and aging drainage infrastructure force local governments all over the nation to implement more comprehensive stormwater management programs as they seek to address drainage system maintenance, capital construction priorities, and to achieve regulatory compliance.

Stormwater pipes and catch basins deteriorate, impairing their ability to convey stormwater, threatening property, causing road closures, and flooding. In some areas, the problem is severe enough that yards and buildings are impacted by the stormwater runoff. To address these problems and comply with increasing state and federal regulations, many communities develop and implement comprehensive stormwater management programs funded by a stormwater utility user fee system. Typical stormwater management programs include the following functions:

- Drainage Improvement Projects
- Storm System Maintenance & Repairs
- Floodplain Management
- Cleaning of Pipes/Ditches
- Water Quality Protection & Improvement
- Compliance with State & Federal Regulations

The city's existing drainage system contains many miles of pipes that are nearing their functional end of life. This infrastructure needs to be repaired, replaced, and/or rehabilitated. ISE's review of the City of Suwanee's existing system identified over \$12 million in improvements that need to be undertaken in the near future. **Fixing deteriorating pipes now - while not inexpensive - is significantly less expensive than replacing broken pipes in the future.** The \$12 million needed to fix and replace pipes now will only get more costly if the City waits.

A stormwater utility is a user fee system assigned to property and its owner to recover the costs to the local government associated with managing the stormwater runoff generated by that that property. Throughout the country, over 1,800 stormwater utilities have been established. Such utilities create a reserve for stormwater management services (including expenses and depreciation) through user fee charges. **Those charges are designed to be fair and equitable to all property owners that utilize the local government's drainage system, facilities, and services.** Stormwater utilities are already in place in Gwinnett County and nine of its cities. Stormwater utility costs for residential properties in the surrounding areas are typically less than \$8 per month.

Funds collected from the stormwater utility pay for stormwater management-related projects and regulatory compliance programs. Such fee systems provide dedicated funding for necessary stormwater facilities, improve maintenance of existing systems, and provide an enhanced level of service focused on minimizing flooding and reducing water pollution. Additionally, stormwater fees fund regulatory compliance activities in accordance with Georgia EPD requirements.

The amount of impervious area for a parcel is related to the increased quantity of runoff and increased non-point source pollutants discharging into the government's drainage system and local waterbodies. This increased burden or demand (water quantity and quality) placed on the government's drainage system and local waterbodies results in higher costs to provide stormwater management services for that parcel. The increased

demand associated with impervious surface-related impacts to the local government's drainage system and local waterbodies is the basis for the user fee charge. **As such, larger parcels with greater amounts of impervious surface area are charged higher fees based on the relative demand placed on the local government's drainage system and local waterbodies.**

For these reasons, stormwater utilities often use the amount of impervious surface on a parcel to determine the impact it has on the entire system. This is because the amount of impervious surface area (i.e., concrete, asphalt, roof tops, etc.) is strongly related to amount of stormwater runoff the site produces. **This information can then be used to determine a parcel's proportionate share of the cost-of-service provided by the local government.**

Without a proportionate share stormwater utility, communities commonly fund the costs to maintain their stormwater systems through property taxes and other similar tax funds. As the EPA notes, stormwater programs funded with property taxes are "not equitable, because the basis for determining property taxes, assessed property value, is irrelevant to the cost of stormwater management for that property." With those approaches large stormwater generators such as commercial shopping centers and large industrial sites do not fully fund their proportionate share of stormwater maintenance. **Stormwater utilities help address this inequity.**

Stormwater utilities are effective and equitable programs that help localities fund and maintain safe and effective stormwater systems. Given the city's extensive and costly stormwater system needs, the city's Citizen Stakeholder Committee recommended that the city strongly consider establishment of a stormwater utility.

Scan for more information about stormwater utilities.

