

# Providence Business News

November 28, 2011

## Paying for stormwater management

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Rhode Island's cities and towns are being urged to consider a new way to help pay for services to deal with the growing problem of polluted stormwater runoff and its often costly consequences, such as beach closures, street flooding, property damage, closed shellfishing beds and impaired water quality.

More than 2,000 cities or municipalities in the country have established a "stormwater utility" to help control the problems that contaminated stormwater cause.

In Rhode Island, Middletown and Westerly are working with the R.I. Department of Environmental Management to consider the feasibility of creating stormwater utilities – public utilities established to provide stormwater-management services. The utilities generate revenue through user fees based on the amount of stormwater generated on a property.

Stormwater pollutants are hardly unique to Rhode Island, but it is a growing concern in a state that is nearly fully developed, said Elizabeth Scott, DEM Office of Water Resources deputy chief.

"This is a stabilized means of funding these projects," she said of the stormwater utilities. "It's equitable, it creates a situation to have money and it's stable. It's a good idea."

At a Oct. 25 conference at the University of Rhode Island Coastal Institute during which stormwater utilities were discussed, 50 participants from the state's municipalities all said their budgets could not support paying for the stormwater treatment that was needed in their towns, and all were interested in hearing more about the utility, Scott said.

In Rhode Island, new design and installation standards to control stormwater came into effect this year. During a panel discussion at the URI conference, municipal leaders were advised of ways of meeting the new standards, including considering a stormwater utility.

Stormwater utility fees are different from real estate taxes, because they are user-based and are tied to stormwater-management services provided by the utility, said Andrew Reese, a vice president with AMEC, an international consulting firm on engineering and project-management services.

"We have for years acknowledged pollution, but treatment hasn't really been addressed," said Reese. Reese advises cities and municipalities to adopt a stormwater utility to provide a dedicated and predictable flow of income to pay for local stormwater-management services.

The owner of a large business with acres of pavement would pay more than the owner of a much smaller, single-family residential parcel. "The more you pave, the more you pay," Reese said.

Nationally, the rates for most utilities fall between \$24 to \$36 a year for a single-family, residential parcel. The majority of the utilities use a flat rate for residential properties. Fees for all other property types are dependent on the type of fee system employed by the municipality.

Stormwater management is primarily funded by general revenue for many municipalities. But dwindling budgets have meant insufficient money to properly maintain and operate drainage systems. The demands on a town's limited budget make funding for stormwater-management projects unpredictable, Reese said.

In 2002, Rhode Island passed legislation, titled Rhode Island Stormwater Management and Utility District Act, that authorized cities and towns to adopt ordinances creating stormwater utilities. Stormwater Utility Districts may include all or part of a city or town, as specified by the ordinance.

Money collected under the utility can be used for such things as the operation and maintenance of existing structures, the retrofitting of existing structures to improve water quality and alleviate downstream flooding or erosion, and the preparation of stormwater-system plans.

The new state standards mandate low-impact development, a site-planning and design strategy addressing reducing runoff in the beginning, said Lorraine Joubert, director of the University of Rhode Island Cooperative Extension Nonprofit Education for Municipal Officials Program.

Municipal planners will update local zoning and land development to accommodate the new standards. The plan is intended to avoid, reduce and manage the stormwater runoff, she said.

Storm drains can lead directly to local waters. In many areas there are no filters or treatment. Stormwater pollutants that enter storm drains can end up in the water people drink and where people fish and swim, by washing down streets, gathering grime, oil and the like, Joubert said.

The URI Cooperative Extension has been working with the state to help organize training in the use of a new standards manual for stormwater management. It is one element of a statewide stormwater education and outreach effort known as Rhode Island Stormwater Solutions.

The goal is to help municipalities and other owners of small stormwater systems to meet education and outreach requirements of the DEM Stormwater Phase II permit program, as required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This statewide effort is considered more cost-effective than if each individual municipality came up with its own plan. The new stormwater-standards manual is one part of this project.

More and more, developers are taking steps to address stormwater run-off in the planning stages of their developments, Reese said.

For instance, for Donald Powers Architects' 15-home development Cottages on the Greene in East Greenwich, the designers installed bioswells and bioretention, where the rainwater is collected in planted swells and planted depressions, and then filters back into the ground.

Increasingly, businesses that own shopping centers or other industrial property owners are also taking responsibility for managing stormwater.

"In Rhode Island, since January of this year, most larger developers have been incorporating low-impact development," said Eric Beck, supervising engineer of DEM's Pollutant Discharge Elimination System.

"We are seeing a lot of designers implement a design strategy" for stormwater.

The 2010 storm that flooded parts of Interstate 95, the Warwick Mall and other places is an example of the need to spend money on stormwater management and treatment, so the water doesn't disrupt businesses, Scott said.

The city of Rockville, Md., adopted a stormwater utility in 2008 and implemented it in 2009. It was one of the best decisions the city ever made, said Mark Charles, city energy manager.

Money still comes from sources such as developer fees and grants, but the primary money to fix and upgrade the stormwater system comes out of the fund, Charles said.

In Middletown, local officials are beginning to collect data on costs related to stormwater management and restoration of damaged property, as part of a study of whether a dedicated utility fund would make sense for the community.

“We’re probably 12 months out before we start having to make some decisions,” said Tom O’Loughlin, director of public works for the town.



*COURTESY URI TRANSPORTATION CENTER CLEAN WATER: R.I. Department of Transportation workers clean a storm drain using a vacuum pump and a vehicle called a "vactor."*