

THE SUN

Runoff District Feedback Sought

January 15, 2012
By Dale P. Faulkner

WESTERLY - A proposal to assess an annual fee on property owners for the amount of storm water runoff they generate is drawing praise and support, as well as questions and criticisms from Town Council members.

An overview of a proposed storm water utility was presented to the council last week by Elizabeth Scott, deputy chief of the state Department of Environmental Management's Office of Water Resources, and Kate England, a Brown University graduate student.

Councilor Caswell Cooke Jr., the lead proponent, emphasized that the storm water utility is not the equivalent of a new, additional tax. In fact, he said, the proposal would have the effect of removing about \$1 million from the town budget.

Storm water fees would generate an equivalent amount. Under a utility, the money collected from fees would be dedicated to infrastructure maintenance and improvements, street sweeping, and other storm water management costs. The average property owner's tax reduction resulting from the smaller town budget would be roughly equivalent to the average homeowner's storm water utility fee, Cooke said.

"It's just a different way of collecting the same money, but it would dedicate it to storm water so that nothing else could use that money, much like the water department and the sewer department," Cooke said.

A feasibility report written by England concluded that the average Westerly homeowner would pay \$68 per year under a flat rate structure that attempts to assess an equitable fee based on the amount of impervious surface in the town. State property would be exempt from the fees but nonprofits would be assessed a fee. The report assumes that the town should raise \$1.3 million annually for storm water management.

According to Scott, the town's storm water management costs are expected to increase as drainage pipes age and new state and federal requirements are implemented. A storm water utility would allow the town to dedicate staff to storm water management, she said.

Under the proposed flat rate structure, businesses and owners of larger multifamily homes would pay an annual storm water utility fee of \$449 per year.

"We're not creating an increased burden on the homeowner. We're actually making it flatter and broader and folks that contribute more to it would have to pay more, so a huge parking lot in a shopping center would have to pay more than you or I as a house owner," Cooke said.

Storm water management is intended to slow storm drainage and improve the quality of water that flows into local water bodies including Little Narragansett Bay and the Pawcatuck River, both of which are impaired, according to the DEM. Management efforts also reduce flash flooding, Scott said.

Councilor Brian McCuin questioned the wisdom of assessing higher fees to businesses that, he said, were required by town zoning regulations to maintain a certain number of parking spaces.

"We want to retain businesses in this town. This is saying, 'We don't want you here,'" McCuin said.

Scott said businesses could be encouraged to put in on-site storm water management systems and could also be offered credits to reduce their annual fee for steps they take to reduce runoff.

Councilor Kenneth Parilla questioned the degree to which storm water runoff contributes to flooding. He said he was also concerned that a storm water utility would be difficult and expensive to implement.

Scott responded that many of the management aspects of a utility are already in place. She said a utility could be implemented slowly, with input from residents and other stakeholders.

Councilors Christopher Duhamel and Campbell Field said that while they have questions about how a storm water utility would work, the idea was worth further discussion and study.

Planning Board member Patricia Douglas urged the council to drop the proposal, saying it would be an unnecessary burden on taxpayers. She also said a local utility would be stuck dealing with pollution caused by other towns.

Scott said the DEM is working with Connecticut state and municipal officials to improve the quality of the Pawcatuck River.

The council hopes to receive a presentation next month from Tom DiPietra Jr., superintendent of the storm water utility district in South Burlington, Vt. Council President Diana Serra also asked that the town's land-use staff and the Public Works Committee give their input on the proposal.

Serra said that she encourages councilors to study new proposals like Cooke's, but she also stressed that residents should be comforted in knowing that the proposal will be subject to additional scrutiny.

Cooke said the proposal would require at least another 12 months worth of study by the town and input from residents and business owners.