

# THE SUN

## Westerly Explores a Stormwater Utility

Monday, August 22, 2011

By Steven Standridge

It's just a point of discussion for now, but residents could be paying for a town stormwater utility in the future.

The Town Council has ordered a feasibility study to be conducted to determine the next course of action regarding stormwater runoff and its effect on the Pawcatuck River, and will meet again with Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

"A stormwater utility is basically a funding mechanism that allows the town to develop a steady revenue source for stormwater management," explains Elizabeth Scott, deputy chief of Water Quality Standards for DEM.

Scott has advised the council on the concept and said her agency has certain funds, resources and manpower available for projects such as this.

"It's worth exploring water quality issues," said Town Manager Steven Hartford. "It's a good way to see how to improve the quality of life and possibly distribute costs more equitably."

Hartford said the town is exploring the concept of a stormwater management district and will be deciding whether the plan is feasible.

A feasibility study is the first step, he said. The study will calculate money needed to manage such a district and also how it would impact property owners on an individual basis.

The Rhode Island Stormwater Management and Utility District Act of 2002 set up guidelines and directives for towns to follow to deal with this problem. The law authorizes town councils in the state to "adopt ordinances creating stormwater management districts," and to "establish a fee system and raise funds for administration and operation of the district."

"We absolutely do not want to add burdens or costs to local business or residents," Hartford said. "But we also need to deal with this issue of the collection and treatment of stormwater. A plan like this would ease the burden on the general taxpayer."

Those who have properties or businesses that contribute to runoff would be responsible for the costs, similar to a water or sewer utility bill. Roof areas, parking lots and driveways are a few examples of major runoff contributors. The size of those areas and the amount of runoff they are determined to create will be factors in how much financial responsibility owners will have.

"The fee system shall be reasonable and equitable so that each contributor of runoff to the system shall pay to the extent to which runoff is contributed," according to the state law.

The fees and their administration will be a result of careful research involving aerial photography and detailed inspection. The thinking behind the plan is to give people incentives to deal with stormwater runoff on-site. In return, payees would receive some sort of credit for compliance. This is not new to some property developers across the nation who already have to deal with ordinances requiring stormwater management and applicable fees before building housing units.

Currently, a similar stormwater management plan is under consideration in Middletown. Narragansett is the only other town in the state that has explored a plan since enactment of the state law in 2002, according to Scott. In 2007, town officials in Narragansett conducted a similar feasibility study with DEM, including financial numbers and analysis, but no further actions were taken. Scott said that conversations have taken place with other municipalities, also without council follow-up.

Additionally, Scott said DEM plans to hold a workshop series in late September or early October to inform officials about such districts.

"The goal is to raise awareness about the means to establish a productive revenue source," Scott said. "We will provide examples from across the New England region of other stormwater management districts."

The workshops will be open to town managers, town planners and other elected officials.