



City of Petersburg, VA Stormwater Utility Frequently Asked Questions



Q. What is stormwater runoff?

A. Stormwater runoff is the water that flows off roofs, driveways, parking lots, streets and other hard surfaces during rain storms. Stormwater runoff is also the rain that flows off grass surfaces and wooded areas that is not absorbed into the soil. The runoff that is not absorbed into the ground pours into ditches, culverts, catch basins and storm sewers. It does not receive any treatment before entering the streams and lakes.

Q. What is stormwater pollution?

A. Water from rain or melting snow either seeps into the ground or “runs off” to lower areas, making its way into streams, lakes, and other water bodies. On its way, runoff water can pick up and carry many substances that pollute water. Examples of common pollutants include fertilizers, pesticides, pet wastes, sediments, oils, salts, trace metals, grass clippings, leaves and litter. Stormwater polluted runoff can be generated anywhere people use or alter the land, such as farms, yards, roofs, driveways, construction sites, and roadways.

Q. Why is stormwater runoff a problem?

A. As precipitation falls on agricultural and undeveloped areas, it is primarily absorbed into the ground or slowly runs off into streams, rivers or other water bodies. However, development resulting in rooftops and paved areas prevent water from being absorbed and create a faster rate of runoff. This development often causes localized flooding or other water quantity or quality issues. In addition, stormwater can carry harmful pollutants, cause flooding, erode topsoil and stream banks and destroy habitats.

Q. Why do we need to manage our stormwater runoff?

A. First, the Federal and State government has mandated that cities the size of Petersburg develop and implement a series of programs to improve the quality of stormwater runoff. Also, stormwater runoff needs to be managed just as any other natural resource. It is needed to maintain the quality of our natural watercourses as drinking water supplies and for recreational activities such as swimming, fishing, water skiing, etc. Secondly, stormwater also needs to be managed to minimize damages that may occur when stormwater runoff exceeds the capacity of the pipes and open channels used to carry stormwater to our rivers and streams.

Q. What Is the City currently doing about these problems?

A. Historically, the City has performed maintenance of the stormwater collection system, which includes cleaning, repair and replacement of the City’s stormwater infrastructure. As a result of Federal and State mandates, the City also regulates the effects of stormwater runoff from new development.

Q. Who owns the stormwater system?

A. Individual property owners. Currently, in most cases, the owner of record is the responsible party to accept, to maintain, to add and to discharge stormwater flows. These systems routinely cross City-maintained property that is generally located within public street rights-of-way.

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Q. What is the City's responsibility for storm water?

A. The City is responsible for managing all aspects of stormwater within its jurisdiction. The City operates and maintains drainage facilities that are located within the public right-of-way or public easements. The City is also responsible for the water quality of natural streams within its jurisdiction as designed by the State and EPA. The City does not maintain facilities that are located on private property or that fall under the jurisdiction of other governmental jurisdictions.

Q. How does the City currently pay for its storm water services?

A. Storm water services are currently funded from revenue derived from property taxes collected by the City. Storm water must compete for these funds with other City services such as parks, roads, fire, police, etc.

Due to the high demand on the General Fund over the past several years, the City has not been able to set aside enough funds to adequately address all the City's stormwater needs. Although the city has done a good job managing the existing program on a limited budget, the backlog of storm water projects has grown and the new, federally mandated programs that must be implemented have exhausted existing resources.

Q. Why has City of Petersburg chosen to implement a separate fee for stormwater management?

A. By establishing a dedicated funding source through stormwater fees, the City can ensure that the revenue required to manage and to maintain this important system is available. A stormwater utility program will enable the City to take a more aggressive approach to storm water management. The additional funds raised through the stormwater fee will allow the City to provide an increased level of system maintenance and repair that is necessary to support the aging infrastructure in Petersburg. In addition, the utility fees will enable the City to construct necessary capital improvement projects to reduce the risk to public health and safety. Finally, the fees will support the development of a comprehensive stormwater management and water quality improvement plan, as mandated by the Federal and State governments.

Q. How did the City of Petersburg develop its stormwater utility program?

A. A citizens Stormwater Advisory Committee (SWAC) was formed in November 2012 to evaluate the current stormwater program. This committee met over a 3 month period and determined that a higher level of service for stormwater management was needed and that additional funding would be required to achieve the higher level of service. The SWAC reached consensus on the recommendation for implementing a stormwater utility fee and presented the recommendations to City Council in the Spring of 2013. The City Council adopted the Stormwater Utility Ordinance in April 2013.

Q. What is the basis for the fee that is charged?

A. The stormwater utility fee is based on the square footage of impervious surface area on your lot. The vast majority of utilities across the country have found this to be the most equitable way to charge and collect revenues for this program. A stormwater utility fee is similar to a water or sewer fee. In essence, customers pay a fee related to the amount of runoff generated from their site, which is directly related to the amount of impervious surface on the site.

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Q. What is impervious surface?

A. Impervious surface means a surface composed of any material that significantly impedes or prevents natural infiltration of water into the soil. Impervious surfaces include, but are not limited to, roofs, buildings, streets, parking areas, and any concrete, asphalt, or compacted gravel surface.

Q. Why do I have to pay a stormwater fee?

A. The City is responsible for compliance with new Federal and State regulations on water quality as well as providing stormwater management facilities and services. This includes installation and maintenance of storm drains, inlets, and ditches as well as ensuring State programs such as erosion and sediment control are provided on construction sites. All of these services are done to protect personal and public property as well as provide for a healthy environment. Funding is not provided by Federal or State government for these services. These requirements are unfunded mandates that are imposed upon all cities similar in size to Petersburg.

Q. When will the stormwater fee take effect?

A. City Council adopted an ordinance in April 2013 regarding the new stormwater fee. The new stormwater fees become effective July 1, 2013. Billing will begin in September 2013.

Q. Why is there a stormwater fee instead of a tax?

A. A property's value does not affect runoff, so property taxes are not the most equitable way to pay for stormwater services. For example, a high-rise building and a shopping mall may have similar value and pay similar property taxes. However, the shopping center produces more runoff because of the amount of parking and rooftops. The fee system ensures the shopping center pays a higher stormwater fee than the high rise.

Q. Are tax-exempt properties also exempt from the stormwater fee?

A. No, because it is a fee – not a tax. Taxes are based on the value of the property. The stormwater fee is assessed based on the amount of impervious surface on the property (i.e. hard surfaces such as roofs, driveways and parking lots), which is directly related to the amount of runoff the property produces. The runoff generated by these impervious surfaces contributes to pollution and flooding problems and, therefore, all property owners should pay their share of the costs.

Q. What is an Equivalent Residential Unit (ERU)?

A. An ERU is the average square footage of the impervious surface area (measured in square feet) of all residential properties in the City. That amount is 2,116 square feet. The ERU was determined by performing detailed measurements of impervious surfaces contained on a sample of residential properties selected at random across all areas of the City. The resulting data was analyzed and the average impervious surface value for the data set determined the ERU value.

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Q. How will residential properties be billed?

A. In general, all residential dwelling units in the City will be charged the base residential rate of \$3.75 per month (or, \$7.50 bi-monthly). The fee must be paid by either the owner or tenant, depending upon who is currently benefiting from the services and who receives the bill. If you are the owner of a duplex, the property will be charged two billing units (i.e. 2 times the base residential rate). Apartments of 5 units or greater will be charged as a non-residential property.

Q. How are non-residential property fees determined?

A. All non-residential properties will be billed at a rate based on their impervious area as well. To determine the monthly fee, divide the total impervious area of your property by 2,116 square feet (or one Equivalent Residential Unit) to obtain the number of ERUs and multiply by the base residential rate (\$3.75 per month per ERU). Impervious areas were determined by analyzing aerial photographs to identify the amount of impervious surface on each property.

Q. Is there anything I can do to reduce my fee?

A. Yes, the City has developed a fee reduction/credit manual that provides opportunities for all customers to reduce their monthly fee. Credits/reductions will be awarded to customers that install best management practices on site that reduce the runoff burden to the City's stormwater system. More information on the credit manual is available on the City's website.

Q. What will the money collected by the Stormwater Utility will be used to pay for?

A. The revenues generated by this fee will be used to fund all stormwater-related services, which include enforcement of the City's stormwater ordinances, planning for future impacts, stormwater infrastructure maintenance and repairs, construction of necessary capital improvement projects and associated property acquisitions. The fee will also pay for annual compliance requirements of the City's NPDES MS4 permit, which is a program mandated by the State and Federal government for all communities similar in size to Petersburg.

Q. Why do we need to spend more for stormwater?

A. Historically, the allocation of funds has not been sufficient to address all of the City's storm water service needs. Local, state, and federal laws also require that municipalities address the environmental impacts of storm water pollution, but do not provide funds to do it. Furthermore, federal and state regulations are continuously becoming more stringent, demanding greater effort (and increased funding) to maintain compliance. Also, while the City has done a good job providing storm water services on a limited budget, the backlog of storm water projects has grown and some maintenance activities have not been performed. Consequently, the City must investigate alternative means for raising revenue.

Q. Do other cities have a stormwater fee?

A. As of 2012, more than 15 cities in Virginia (and over 1,300 nationwide) had implemented a stormwater fee. This list includes cities such as Colonial Heights, Richmond, Lynchburg, Staunton, Virginia Beach and others. Many cities are currently evaluating the feasibility of such fees as well, including Charlottesville, Roanoke City, Roanoke County and Henrico, to name a few.

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Q. What are the goals of the City of Petersburg’s stormwater program?

A. The stormwater program focuses on reducing the potential for the loss of life or property due to flooding and improving and protecting the quality of our lakes, rivers and streams.

Q. What are some examples of drainage problems?

A. Drainage problems may include roadway or structural flooding, clogged or failing underground pipes and culverts, stream bank erosion and stormwater pollution affecting a stream.

Q. Why do I have to pay when I do not have any drainage problems?

A. Everyone in the City benefits from the Stormwater Management Program. If stormwater runs off your property, the City must have a program and funding to manage the increase in runoff and pollutants. Direct benefits may include complying with Federal and State mandates, protecting your property from upstream runoff, protecting property downstream from your runoff, providing safe roadways, educating our children about pollution, and improving water quality.

Q. I have a drainage problem in my yard. Who do I call to get help with this problem?

A. You can call the City of Petersburg – Public Works at (804) 733-2355. If the problem is a City responsibility, we will investigate your concern and advise you of what action can be taken.

Q. Where can I get more information regarding the stormwater utilities?

A. Any questions regarding the Petersburg Stormwater Utility should be directed to Darryl Walker (804.733.2357 or dwalker@petersburg-va.org). You can also obtain information online at <http://www.petersburg-va.org/stormwater/>.

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