

PREPARING TO ADDRESS THE PUBLIC



Communication is the single most important tool a community can use when creating and implementing a stormwater fee. It is crucial to communicate how the fee will support community priorities and be legally acceptable according to state law. Include the public throughout the process and prepare yourself for pushback by crafting strategic messages that clearly explain the fee's purpose and benefits.

COMMON MISCONCEPTION

A stormwater fee is a "Rain Tax."

TRUTH

Stormwater fees help maintain and replace infrastructure that prevents flooding.

OVERCOME PUSHBACK

Misconceptions can be avoided through public education campaigns that communicate specific benefits and the importance of stormwater fees to all residents. The more that the community understands how the fee will affect them – both in terms of costs and benefits – the more likely that they will accept the fee's implementation.

STUDY THE LOCAL SITUATION

A feasibility study will help determine the costs of implementing a stormwater fee. This will prepare the municipality to answer questions about why *this* fee was selected, and the associated costs and benefits of implementation. It will also ensure that the fee will meet financial needs of the municipality.

UNDERSTAND THE STATE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Stormwater fees may generate negative feedback. Lawsuits during or after the establishment of stormwater fees are often filed in opposition. Each state will have unique requirements under both the law and established case law. As stormwater fees can be expensive to develop, governments are advised to understand the legal framework applicable to their jurisdiction.

TALK TO THE PUBLIC

Do not avoid the public. Talk to them. Engage them in all parts of the process. The selected fee structure should make sense and fall within the community's ability and willingness to pay. The only way to know if that mark is met is to engage in public outreach.

EDUCATE THE PUBLIC

One of the first steps to implementing a stormwater fee will be to educate the public about stormwater and explain why the fee is needed. Develop an education program with a concise message and supporting statements that are positive, including data to back up the need for the funds. The benefits of stormwater management and the fee selected should be fully explained. Messages may include statements like:

“Our new, fully-funded stormwater management program will...”

- ➔ reduce flooding and protect homes, businesses and infrastructure.
- ➔ create opportunities for outdoor recreation.
- ➔ improve water quality.
- ➔ help our community meet/exceed federal and state mandates and avoid costly violations.

BUILD PUBLIC SUPPORT

Creating a stormwater fee system that will fully fund a stormwater program *and* be generally accepted by the public will take time. Investing time upfront to educate and involve the public in the development and implementation of the stormwater fee program will lead to a smoother and more successful transition.

ENGAGE LEADERSHIP

Help local leaders prepare for pushback. Implementing a stormwater fee will take strong leadership by elected officials or other local officials. Provide local leaders with information to share with the public that shows the inadequacy of existing stormwater funding. Show the costs associated with managing the stormwater system and the expected benefits of the new stormwater fees.

EXAMPLE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

- ➔ **Use public meetings, small focus groups, surveys, etc. to engage the public in discussion about stormwater. Ask them what they want from their stormwater system. What level of service do they expect?**
- ➔ **Determine how to reach the desired level of service asked for by the public, and the stormwater fee that best matches public expectations.**
 - ➔ A stormwater fee structure should be simple and fit the local economic and political climate.
 - ➔ The neighboring community’s stormwater utility and fee may look different, that is okay.
- ➔ **Communicate plans to the public. Be sure to explain how the fee will achieve the level of service asked for during the public engagement phase.**
 - ➔ Be sure to communicate through mailers, social media, traditional print sources and community meetings. The public expects communication in a variety of ways, and they appreciate information that is easily accessible.
 - ➔ Prior to the first official “bill,” send out a sample bill, or expected charge document, so the public can learn about how the new stormwater fee impacts their property. Give them the opportunity to communicate concerns prior to the first fee charge.
 - ➔ Create a publicly accessible database of all properties subject to the fee. If using a variable or intensity of development fee structure, create an appeals process, as some mapping software may inaccurately measure impervious surface. The appeals process should be easy to understand and quick to respond.