



Opinion

Editorial: Peoria between rock and hard ... er, wet place on stormwater tax

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As Peoria implements its new stormwater utility tax June 1, we imagine there will be some sticker shock when the quarterly bills start coming in. This is before the big bang hits; Peorians probably ain't seen nothin' yet.

Commercial and residential customers alike — 48,500 properties — will be paying \$3 per 1,000 square feet of impervious area (roofs, driveways, etc.) to cover this very cement city's costs of managing its stormwater runoff unless they take other measures to keep as much water on their own properties as possible.

The tax comes in advance of a whopper of an expected bill — upwards of \$230 million — once the city reaches its long-in-the-making deal with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to fix the problem of sewage going into the Illinois River when heavy rains or snow melt overwhelm the combined sewer/stormwater pipes in the older city, mostly Downtown. It absolutely fits the definition of an “unfunded mandate” from Uncle Sam (even from Scott Pruitt's EPA, evidently). In fact the city has been in non-compliance since 1972's Clean Water Act.

If the expected cost now for the average residential lot with 2,600 square feet of hard surface is \$94 annually — businesses with typically larger facilities and parking lots will get hit harder, some in the tens of thousands of dollars, topping \$60,000 in one case — that could double or triple once the EPA bring down its hammer, unless the city targets another revenue source not likely to be any more popular.

We're environmental sorts, and so we're all for keeping sewage out of the one river we have. The "green" solution the city proposes is creative, novel, potentially cheaper than the alternative. Rain barrels and gardens, bioswales and cisterns, detention basins and green roofs are all good stuff. Peoria is not alone in having a stormwater utility, joining Morton, Eureka, Bloomington, Normal, etc.

And to its credit the city is giving residents an opportunity to defray their costs, potentially up to 65 percent.

Unfortunately, our first-blush reaction to the 20-page manual outlining the options is that it will be too much effort for most, with too much paperwork and potentially too much up-front cost — including a fee just to access the incentives/credits, including in some cases the hiring of a professional engineer to sign off — to encourage much participation, which has been under 25 percent in other communities (and if it's higher, will Peoria's staff of three be enough to conduct inspections and enforcement?).

A sample: If you want to build a water quality detention basin to get a 10 percent credit, you'll need to follow the formula " $V_{ff} = 3,630 \times C \times A$ where V_{ff} = first flush volume, post development (in cubic feet), C = post-runoff coefficient, A = drainage area tributary to detention basin (in acres)."

Got that?

City Hall has been getting an earful from some neighborhoods, so some of this may change. What we don't expect to change is that everybody pays no matter their individual contribution to the problem. Just pragmatically, complying with this CSO mandate would be unaffordable with only a small percentage of Peorians footing the bill. Beyond that, arguably everybody benefits from having a decent Downtown, and from keeping raw sewage out of central Illinois' primary natural asset, the Illinois River. Older areas, those that came first in any community, will always have infrastructure that requires more attention. Newer neighborhoods will become old someday, too. It doesn't mean you abandon them.

The flip side is that this is a big cost, one more thing in a Peoria that leads the state's cities in population loss, as it is. This City Council has some very, very difficult decisions ahead.

