

Homeowners raising storm over Peoria's stormwater tax

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PEORIA — John Salch would like to think that the 7,000 bricks he's used in the driveway at the Moss Avenue home he's worked on for the past 30 years should be recognized by the city that wants property owners to do what they can to retain stormwater.

But Salch is one of a number of Peoria homeowners with questions about how city officials view their property now that Peoria's stormwater utility went into operation this month.

"The aerial view used by the city fails to see my 7,000 bricks installed to allow the rain to soak into the ground," said Salch, who has degrees in both chemistry and physics and is no stranger to the concept of what constitutes a permeable surface.

The many bricks were laid by hand by Salch, 76, over a 30-year period and invoke the area's brick history with names such as Purington, Poston and Barr at one's feet. There's even a brick pathway through the robust garden that he's put in. "Not one drop runs off this yard," he said.

"I have no complaint with the city calling for retaining stormwater or basing the assessment on property size. I'm just upset with their satellite picture of my property," said Salch.

The new tax assesses every property owner in the city at a rate of \$3 per 1,000 square feet of impermeable space. That's space like a roof or driveway where water can run off into the city sewer system.

The combined sewer overflow problem occurs when rains overwhelm city sewers that normally channel sewage to the treatment plant, dumping sewage into the Illinois River during heavy rains. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been after the city for decades to come up with a solution.

While awaiting EPA approval, Peoria has proposed using green infrastructure to fix the problem, encouraging citizens to use rain barrels, rain gardens and permeable pavers to retain stormwater. But it's an expensive fix, estimated to cost between \$200 million and \$250 million.

Which might explain the stormwater utility tax the city kicked off in June. Peoria expects the new utility to raise \$4 million for the period of June through December in 2018 and \$8 million for a full year in 2019.

The first bills are expected to go out in July, but citizens can get an idea of what they'll have to pay by going to the city website (PeoriaStormwater.com). When Salch did that, the retired Peoria Ag Lab scientist found that he wasn't getting any credit for all those bricks on his property.

The city website also offers residents the opportunity to download the city's credit and grant manual, listing ways to capture stormwater in order to reduce their bill.

Nikki Andrews is a Peoria homeowner who lives on Hanssler Avenue and has consulted that manual — with less than outstanding results. "I am currently reading the stormwater manual over and over to understand the language and requirements for my property and my church's property. I'm glad for what they're trying to do, but they're not being helpful," she said.

"For my house, I would like to put in a rain garden and rain barrels, but, like I said, I am currently reading the manual a couple times to figure out how I go about doing that economically when my bill will be close to \$8 per month," said Andrews, who plans to call the city's public works department (494-8800) to get more information.

Per Ellingson, who lives in the Cottage District, has also checked out the city manual. "There's definitely a lot of information there, but I've only scratched the surface. A rain garden would make sense, but I haven't done a lot of gardening," he said.

Ellingson suggested that the city add a little context on its site. "I think we need to see a little of the back story as to how this stormwater utility came about," he said.

Bill O'Brien, president of the Forrest Hill Homeowners Association, said he's awaiting more information from the city. "For most homeowners, it's an abstract issue, because people don't understand how they can be helpful in finding a solution. Lack of information is a major issue," he said.

Conrad Stinnett, president of the University East Neighborhood Association, said he was in favor of uncovering the brick streets in the University East neighborhood to help with stormwater retention.

"The (stormwater utility) tax, like any tax, is not sitting well. Federal and state representatives should be advocating for funds to fix the problem. Unfunded mandates are never popular. I do think previous City Councils should have dealt with this instead of kicking the can down the road," he said.

Rod Lorenz, another Moss Avenue resident, questions the city's method in calculating runoff costs. He thinks the system's emphasis on impermeable surfaces to determine the tax rate should be scrapped in favor of a method that bases the rate on the amount of permeable surfaces, instead.

"On most residential properties, downspouts direct all roof runoff onto soil surfaces, and it is easily observed that none of that water reaches the sewer during even the heaviest rainfall. Obviously, it is just as easy to determine permeable surface as impermeable surface, so a simple calculation could account more accurately for contribution to sewer flow with little difficulty," he said.

Lorenz also raised the issue of stormwater coming off paved surfaces, such as roadways. "It is difficult to understand why the cost of dealing with street runoff should be assigned to homeowners in relation to the size of their property. This is clearly irrational and unfair. It seems that a more fair way of distributing this cost is to relate it to the actual use of streets and roads through a small addition to taxes on motor fuels. Homeowners who don't use the streets, or use them little, should pay less," he said.

"I don't question the need for solving the CSO problem or pretend that the sewer utility rate calculation is a simple matter, but it seems there are more fair and rational means of distributing the costs than have been announced publicly so far," said Lorenz.

Peter Kobak, a member of the city's Innovation Team, a group that helped formulate innovative ways for the city to tackle its CSO challenge, plans to hold a rain-barrel painting party with friends later this month.

"No one likes an extra bill, but people can reduce it by trying something now," he said. After an application fee of \$5, the city will reimburse homeowners for up to two rain barrels for up to \$50 each.

As yet, the two of largest landscaping companies in the area haven't reported much interest, either from homeowners or the city. "There hasn't been a lot of proactive education about the problem," said Nate Hoerr, one of the owners of the Hoerr Nursery, 8020 N. Shade Tree Drive.

"We've had limited exposure to it. But we can rise to the occasion. We can order plants that serve as natural wetlands. We're willing to help, but there has to be a market," he said. Hoerr added it might take bills going out to stir more interest in the subject.

Ben Roberts, a division manager at Green View Nursery in Dunlap, also reported little activity from callers. "We do design rain gardens. We do a few every year," he said.

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