



## Stormwater mandates could mean new fees

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PEORIA — A spring shower that drops an inch of rain onto an average 2,800-square-foot roof will leave behind approximately 1,700 gallons of runoff water.

Multiply that by thousands of homes and that's a lot of water needing somewhere to go, whether into green space or storm sewers.

A study for managing the region's stormwater, from assessing the current systems to outlining needed repairs and new construction, is expected to get under way early next year, including exploring ways to pay for those needs.

With estimates soaring — to more than \$120 million needed to address Peoria's combined sewer overflow alone — putting a price tag on area needs to meet federal mandates could be astounding. Coupled with a cash-strapped state and local governments, the unfunded stormwater mandates could mean looking to residents to help pay for them through new fees.

"As it is, stormwater systems are something a lot of people just don't pay attention to until something breaks," said Matt Wahl, planning and zoning director for Peoria County. "You have a whole gamut of things out there that need to be fixed and engineered — a lot you don't know about until you start looking — and really no money to address them."

Federal guidelines and impending fines are forcing communities throughout the country to take a hard look in their backyards.

Peoria County is leading the way locally with a study that many look to for guidance and a framework toward compliance, thanks to a federal grant it received from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Much of the nearly \$500,000 grant is being used to pay for about a dozen stormwater projects, from rebuilding an East Peoria retention pond to repairing underground pipes to alleviate flooding and erosion in Pekin Heights and elsewhere.

The local governments participating are getting 55 percent of their projects paid for. In return, they agree to be part of and pay for part of the study, which will include a phase for the development of a stormwater utility fee. There are no obligations for the communities participating.

But many local officials say a new fee to pay for stormwater needs may be inevitable based on costs.

Morton implemented a funding mechanism in 2006 to deal with stormwater issues.

Mayor Norm Durlinger said the village adopted a utility fee that this fiscal year is estimated to collect \$930,000 to deal specifically with stormwater and sewer construction and maintenance.

"The EPA is putting so many requirements on all communities, whether it's flat or next to the river, that we just could not afford with the lowest real estate tax rate in the area to absorb what we have to do, that's why we went forward with the fee," Durlinger said.

For the first five years, each residence paid \$4.50 annually. Businesses, churches and other units of government, including the village itself, paid that rate for every 3,500 square feet of property. This year, the rate increased to \$4.64 per year.

In Pekin, City Manager Joe Wuellner has proposed the City Council develop a stormwater fee to help bring the city in compliance with other Clean Water Act issues. He has said the fund would initially pay to fix drainage ditches currently maintained by the city with no dedicated funding. Down the road, the fee could be used to add retention ponds or other fixes for flooding.

Peoria also has proposed a \$5 fee for residents in the past, which was anticipated to generate about \$2.8 million annually.

But new taxes are widely unpopular, especially at times of economic strife.

Even with the grant and local projects putting about \$1 million toward the issue, it will barely dent the total overall needs. Still, local officials say they have to start somewhere and the study will help plot out a course, though likely a challenging one.

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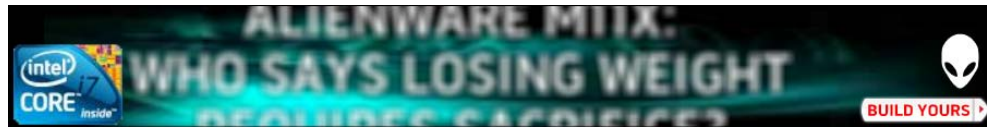
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