

No one wants to pay another tax.

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No one wants to pay another tax.

But they're paying one in Morton. They're paying one in Washington, where flooding in the early 1990s caused a tremendous amount of damage for residents of the Washington Knolls subdivision.

It may come to that in other places as well, such as East Peoria, Pekin and especially Peoria, where residents who live along major creeks are seeing severe erosion in their backyards.

Such a utility fee would be used to offset the effects of storm water runoff. Storm water flows over land during and after a rainstorm, carrying pollutants including sediment, nutrients, heavy metals, oils, grease, pesticides and bacteria into a larger body of water, such as the Illinois River.

In Peoria and East Peoria, erosion of the banks is a constant battle. Both homeowners and the government have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to shore up steep slopes, never coming close to a solution.

The Environmental Protection Agency has identified storm water runoff as the culprit for some of the most serious water pollution in the country.

Three years ago, the EPA told communities they had to have a storm water management system in place by 2008.

Leading the way

The village of Morton has taken the lead in setting in place a funding mechanism to deal with storm water issues, said Terry Kohlbus executive director of the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission.

"Morton is the first non-home rule government to institute a utility fee for storm water management," he said. "Until recently, the court ruled that non-home rule jurisdictions didn't have the authority, but Morton found what they think is a way to withstand the challenge."

When he championed this project three years ago, Darrell Vierling, a Village Board member, wasn't trying to set any precedent. He convinced community members that if they didn't pay the tax today, they would pay dearly in the future.

The village's utility fee went into effect in May and is estimated to bring in \$800,000 annually for dealing with storm water issues.

Washington, too, has a tax to help alleviate storm water problems. It took effect earlier this year and is projected to bring in \$350,000 a year for street improvement and storm water management.

"We felt we needed a sustainable source of revenue, and most residents agreed that it was important," said Bob Morris, Washington's city administrator.

This summer, the city expanded its storm water detention basin at a cost of approximately \$225,000.

Washington's storm water management planning began in 1998, when it purchased 135 acres of land

called the Blumenshine property east of Washington to build a detention basin, said Alderman Jim Gee.

"We also purchased 67 acres known as the Tarvin property for the same reason," he said.

With the expansion of the basin in the Blumenshine property, there is more than 1.3 million cubic feet of additional capacity for water.

"The idea is to reduce flooding throughout Farm Creek, because it gets pretty bad when we have a major rain," Gee said. "The second reason is to reduce the peak flow during storms into Farm Creek that will reduce erosion and cut back on sediment flowing into the Illinois River."

The basin not only ensures the pace of water flowing downhill is slower, it also acts as a filter so that the water entering the Illinois River is much cleaner.

Conflicting priorities

Storm water management is a sore subject in Peoria, which sees the EPA's directives on clean water protection and soil erosion as intrusive and yet another unfunded mandate.

But two City Council members, Bill Spears and George Jacob, are pushing for a solution.

"Councilman Bill Spears has requested \$1 million in the '07 budget for storm water issues." Peoria Mayor Jim Ardis said. "Frankly, this will be very difficult to push through, as it's only a small portion of what is actually needed."

The discussions will take place while planning for next year's budget and continue next spring for the '08 deadline, he said.

Peoria City engineer Gene Hewitt is only too aware that at a time when the city has multiple problems, storm water management is low on the priority. But the only way to deal with the issue, Hewitt said, "is to have a steady source of revenue."

Jane Gerdes, another engineer for the city, agrees, but believes a regional fee would be more effective.

"The bad effects of erosion are the same whether it is in a rural or urban area," Gerdes said. "The most challenging thing is funding. To fix a small area requires about \$1.5 million. It's a lot of money, and it's hard to find that in the city budget. Yes, Morton is taking the lead, but it would be more effective for us to do it on a regional watershed basis that doesn't just look at political boundaries."

Peoria County is informally looking at a utility tax, said Matt Wahl, director of planning and zoning.

"It's not a top priority," he said. "We're mainly concerned with complying with EPA's Phase 2 requirements."

East Peoria is already compliant with all the EPA requirements, and its problems with erosion and storm water runoffs are under control, said Rick Semonski, supervisor of streets for that city.

"We do put in controls with rip rap and rocks to shore up banks, but we haven't had any major problems yet," Semonski said. "When the river floods, we have a valving system that turns off when the water gets high. But when the water gets to a certain stage, we have to literally pump water from the sewer system over the levy back into the river. But it doesn't happen very often."

While a utility fee is not on the horizon, it may come up later, he said.

Like Morton, Pekin does not have steep bluffs and ravines to contend with, but storm water erosion is a concern that costs the city approximately \$150,000 a year, said Joe Wuellner, director of public works.

"We are in the process of getting our codes modified to meet EPA requirements and hope to bring it to City Council by the end of the year for implementation in January," he said.

While it has long complied with regulations regarding erosion control measures at new development sites, the new codes will monitor those requirements and add penalties.

Wuellner said he'll have to add at least one more person to his staff, and the measures will double his budget.

"The drainage lines and ditches have to be maintained, and we have to monitor what goes into the sewer," Wuellner said.

The question of a utility fee has been discussed at staff level but has not yet been presented to the council, he said.

"That's what we're looking at, but no one likes a user fee, and we've got several issues that will need a user fee to pay for taking care of (them)," he said.

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