

EDITORIAL LETTER



INVEST NOW ... OR PAY LATER

As storm water issues continue to rise on the agendas of U.S. municipalities, local news outlets are granting the underlying stories significant coverage. Stricter legislation—think looming but seemingly tentative National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Phase II enforcement—and aging infrastructure leave communities little choice but to turn to property owners for consistent support.

The storm water utility fees that are so often at the center of media attention, while they fund solely storm water issues, are often met with resistance. Many citizens, businesses and even churches and schools do not feel a responsibility for area storm water management. Water and wastewater system fees have become the norm, but the introduction of new storm water charges leaves many feeling cheated and frustrated.

A financial responsibility targeting citizens' wallets and budgets may seem cruel, but utility fees are not taxes. In fact, they are often the fairest way for a municipality to acquire storm water funds. So long as local governments do not take in more dollars than they use (hardly an issue considering our nation's crumbling infrastructure) and otherwise handle allocations properly, the fee is exactly what it claims to be—a monetary amount users owe for a regular service.

It seems to me storm water utility fees are ultimately a favor to property owners—the funds typically go toward operation and maintenance projects, as well as capital improvement work. A handful of dollars each month seems a fair price to pay for dry basements, drivable streets, cleaner recreation areas and quality drinking water. And it seems only fair that those properties containing greater amounts of impervious pavement—tax-exempt or not—may have to invest more money, as their existence places more strain on the aforementioned resources.

As more communities implement these fees, people are bound to complain. But racking up fines and allowing infrastructure to crumble threatens these individuals' quality of life. What if officials were forced to take funds from other public sectors to address a flooding emergency? Property owners would lose out on other municipal benefits and find their possessions under water. It should not take adverse circumstances like these to convince people of utility fees' potential benefits.

A storm water user fee is not necessarily the right choice for every municipality technically, politically or legally, but it is often a viable and attractive option for helping fund relevant needs. Public outreach becomes key in convincing people that although Mother Nature provides the rainfall, storm water management is a resident responsibility. "Better to pay up now" might be a good message to emphasize. If property owners realize they will save later—in terms of time, trouble and dollars—perhaps a storm water utility bill would not seem like such a burden.

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