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Stormwater utilities: The next sustainable development incentive for property owners

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Gas, electric, water, sewer bills. As a property owner or lessee, these are typical charges you pay to the municipality or private utility company for your building services. What, though, is a "stormwater" utility? Are you responsible to pay for your connection to the municipal storm drain system that collects stormwater runoff generated from your roof, parking lot, driveway? Most likely not...yet anyway.

Most municipalities own, maintain, and operate a network of storm drains that discharge stormwater to local water bodies. The EPA currently regulates stormwater discharges from these Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4s) through the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) program. The NPDES program requires permit coverage for regulated MS4s, requiring implementing a stormwater management program to address polluted discharges to local water bodies.

In some municipalities, storm drains are still connected to combined sewers, which overflow combined sanitary and storm drainage to local water bodies during wet weather. These municipalities face further scrutiny to comply with the provisions of the Clean Water Act by remediating combined sewer overflows through state and federal consent decrees.

Municipal stormwater projects are typically funded by general funds, property tax revenue, loans, grants, and drainage connection fees. Municipalities are also authorized by most states to establish a stormwater authority and charge fees to property owners in a similar fashion to fees charged by other utilities. Stormwater fees are typically established based on the property's impervious surfaces. Several cities in New England have adopted a stormwater utility including, Newton, Chicopee, and Reading, Mass.; Burlington, VT.; and Lewiston, ME.

An example of a large east coast city that has adopted a stormwater utility is Philadelphia. As part of a comprehensive plan to address combined sewer flows and polluted stormwater discharges in conformance with agreements stemming from several consent orders, the city of Philadelphia is in the process of implementing a comprehensive stormwater plan called "Green City, Clean Waters".

The Green City, Clean Waters Plan combines traditional strategies, such as wet weather treatment plant upgrades and adaptive management, with a green infrastructure approach.

The city's green goal is to retrofit 1/3 of the total impervious area in the combined sewer area to utilize green infrastructure techniques. Several strategies are proposed to meet this goal, including enforcing strong stormwater regulations for new developments, constructing capital green infrastructure projects, leveraging partnerships with private investments, and the creation of a stormwater fee and credit system based on the property's impervious coverage and use of on-site stormwater controls.

The Green City, Green Waters Plan is an alternative to a \$9-\$10 billion relief tunnel that would have

placed a significant financial burden on all taxpayers. Instead, property owners with impervious coverage and no on-site stormwater management practices face the largest fees, therefore, incentivizing disconnection from the combined system through green infrastructure retrofits and projects.

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