

# **Storm Water FAQ**

## **1. What is stormwater and why should we care?**

Like sanitary sewer services, the county operates and maintains a system of pipes and channels that drain stormwater and protect our homes and businesses from flooding. This system is costly to operate and maintain, and is facing increasing regulatory requirements from the Environmental Protection Agency. Stormwater is water from rain. As rain falls to earth in agricultural and undeveloped areas, it is either absorbed or it slowly runs off and dissipates. Rooftops and paved areas not only prevent the water from being absorbed, but cause it to run off at a much faster rate. As a result, stormwater can accumulate, causing nuisance flooding and possible threats to public health and safety. Furthermore, our current infrastructure system of pipes needs repair and replacement due to age. A proactive replacement program is needed to keep the system functioning correctly. Fixing drainage problems is only a part of the problem. As the rain falls onto our streets and runs off, it carries pollutants such as gasoline, oil, and heavy metals. Pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers are washed from lawns and other green spaces. With the passage of time, these pollutants build up in our waterways and underground drainage systems, damaging our streams, rivers and lakes.

## **2. What is a stormwater utility user fee?**

A user fee is a mechanism for the county to recover costs for services it must provide to meet public demands and stormwater regulations. The stormwater user fee is structured to recover costs fairly and equitably.

## **3. Are we the only community with a stormwater user fee?**

No. Stormwater user fees are being used in many cities and counties in the United States and several in Georgia. Nearby communities that have a stormwater user fee include City of Loganville, Gwinnett County, Athens Clarke County and the City of Auburn.

## **4. Why do we need a stormwater user fee?**

A stormwater user fee provides revenue to maintain and improve existing stormwater infrastructure in Barrow County as well as to implement the comprehensive stormwater quality management plan required by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. We recognized the need to increase the scope of stormwater services provided by the County for three primary reasons. See Stormwater Utility user Fee FAQs (below).

**First**, is our responsibility to maintain the existing public infrastructure, much of which is underground. But just because it is underground does not mean it should be out of mind. For example, failing drain pipes can cause streets to cave in all around the County. Prior to the adoption of the utility our responses consisted of mainly spot repairs and filling in sinkholes with dirt and rock, i.e., treating the symptom instead of the cause. This historical level of response was analogous to just fixing potholes in residential streets but never repaving. We needed a more proactive maintenance effort for our storm drain system.

**Secondly**, we needed to protect our environment and we have new regulatory requirements for environmental protection and stream habitat improvement. The Georgia Environmental Protection Division has placed conditions in our wastewater permits that require us to bring all of the County's streams into compliance with new water quality and habitat standards.

**Thirdly**, this reason is the need to improve customer services and responses.

A stormwater service fee based on impervious surfaces was determined to be the most fair and equitable method of distributing the costs of maintaining and operating the stormwater system.

## **5. What was the process for establishing the stormwater user fee?**

One would think raising property taxes would be a viable alternative. However, increasing the County's property tax was not the best choice because a good rational relationship does not exist between property value and the amount of runoff generated by a particular parcel of land. It is true however, that the more runoff there is, the greater the use of the system, and the greater the cost in maintaining the system. Additionally, raising the revenue through property taxes would omit many parcels that generate runoff, but enjoy tax exemptions. This would shift the burden and result in a higher bill to homes and businesses that may or may not generate large amounts of runoff, but that do not qualify for property tax exemptions.

A second alternative examined was to increase water and sewer bills. Similar to property taxes, there is not a strong rational relationship between the amount of water that might flow through the water meter and the extent of impervious surface on a parcel. Additionally, many water and sewer bills do not go to the property owner.

A third alternative examined was stormwater impact fees, but State law expressly prohibits the use of impact fee revenue for repair and replacement of existing infrastructure. Much of the stormwater utility revenue goes towards maintenance and replacement of pipes, collection structures, and detention facilities.

That is the nature of a utility, such as electricity or water, whereby costs are allocated according to impact. The same holds true for other utility bills; for example, governments and churches also pay water bills.

## **6. What is the basis for the user fee?**

The stormwater utility user fee is based on the amount of impervious surface area to estimate stormwater runoff from properties.

## **7. What is impervious surface?**

Impervious surfaces are hardened surface areas that either prevent or limit the natural entry of water into the soil. Rooftops, buildings, streets, parking lots, sidewalks, asphalt, concrete, other paving, driveways, decks, patios, and artificial turf are all examples of impervious surfaces. These improvements reduce natural infiltration into the soil, which increases runoff.

## **8. Are gravel driveways/roads being charged?**

No, the area of gravel surfaces do not contribute to that area used to determine the user service fee. If a gravel area has been included in the impervious area identified on a parcel please contact the Stormwater office.

## **9. How are fees determined?**

The County decided to follow the national model of measuring impervious surface area on individual properties. The user fee is determined based on the total square footage of impervious area. The equation used to determine the fee is as follows:

**FEE = RATE (\$18.00) X ERU (impervious unit of 3478 sq. ft.)**

The average residential unit was determined to be 3478 square feet. This makes all residential parcels equal to one ERU thus a flat rate was set for all residential parcels. The same equation applies to commercial and industrial properties. Eighteen dollars will be charged for every 3478 sq ft unit. The stormwater fee is a line item on the annual property tax bill.

## **10. How is the impervious surface measured?**

The County takes the measurements from the Tax Assessors office and applies the measurements to the Stormwater bill. This information can be seen at [www.qpublic.net/ga/barrow/](http://www.qpublic.net/ga/barrow/).

## **11. Who has to pay?**

All properties with 50 Sq. Ft. of impervious surface or more in unincorporated Barrow County will pay the stormwater user fee. These properties include houses, businesses, industries, schools, public facilities, and churches. The County made a special effort to ensure fairness and equity.

## **12. Why are churches and schools being billed?**

Because this is a user fee and not a tax. The user fee, just like electric, drinking water, and sanitary sewer fees, is based upon the cost of services provided. Because this is not a tax, it is collected from all customers who receive service. Churches and schools, like other properties, contribute runoff to the County. Because of the size and amount of parking lots and roofs on these properties, the runoff from these properties may be significant. Exempting properties that potentially generate large amounts of runoff would shift the burden of financing the operation and maintenance of the stormwater system to homes and businesses that do not qualify for property exemptions and unfairly result in a higher bill for the non-exempt properties. For this reason, they will be treated like all other customers under the user fee rate structure.

## **13. What will the money be used for?**

Some of the other major components of this program include:

- Meeting the requirements of the County's stormwater permit
- Improving maintenance and repair of the county's stormwater system
- Developing stormwater design standards and regulations an ensuring they are met
- Stormwater infrastructure replacement including culverts, dams, curb inlets, head walls and conveyance systems.

## **14. It hasn't rained in a while. Do I still have to pay the stormwater fee?**

The storm drainage infrastructure including pipes, catch basins, etc. must be maintained no matter how much flow is running through it at any given moment. These drains must be kept maintained so that the next storm does not result in flooding and damage to roads and other infrastructure. In addition, the fee supports ongoing costs associated with investigation of illegal dumping into storm drains during dry weather and towards the repair of streams and watercourses damaged by previous storms.

## **15. Why don't cities have to pay?**

Cities located within Barrow County, have their own stormwater programs which are currently funded by those cities. Since the county does not maintain any stormwater structures inside these cities, the county does not charge them a service fee.

## **16. I have a detention pond on my property. I'm I responsible for the maintenance of the pond?**

All Residential ponds in the County are maintained and inspected by Barrow County.

## **17. As an individual property owner, how do I find out how much I am going to pay?**

You can E-mail [mtreeter@barrowga.org](mailto:mtreeter@barrowga.org) or call 770-307-3070 for any questions regarding stormwater billing.

## **18. If I disagree with the amount being charged, what can I do?**

Any property owner may request a review of their stormwater service fee by submitting a request in writing, along with any supporting information, to the Stormwater Coordinator within 30 days after the date the tax bill is mailed or issued to the property owner.

## **19. When will I receive my bill and when is it due?**

The stormwater service fee will appear as a service fee line item on your property tax bill along with other service fees that may apply such as street lights. Please check with the Office of the Tax Commissioner for exact dates of tax bills being due for Barrow County each year.

## **20. What if I was overcharged?**

Please contact the Stormwater Coordinator with any billing questions, 770-307-3070 or [mtreeter@barrowga.org](mailto:mtreeter@barrowga.org)

**21. What if I choose not to pay the stormwater fee?**

All unpaid stormwater service fees shall be collected from the owner of the parcel, regardless of whom the bill was originally directed to, by using all methods allowed under Georgia law. Failure to receive a bill is not justification for nonpayment. Delinquent stormwater service fees will incur a 1% per month late penalty assessed against the owner of the unpaid balance.

**22. I am renting an apartment or house. Do I have to pay this charge?**

Under the billing process, stormwater utility bills will be sent to the property owner. It will be up to the property owner to decide how to handle it.

**23. What if my property tax bill is paid by my mortgage company through an escrow account, will my mortgage payment go up?**

The mortgage company will pay the tax bill as usual. You will need to contact them to find out if, when or how they will adjust your escrow payments.

**24. I live in a subdivision that has a community center/pool/tennis courts. Will my HOA dues increase?**

The bills will be sent to the owner of the property. If the parcel is in the HOAs name then it will receive the bill.