

Recommendation for Municipal Stormwater Fee Credit Programs

Runoff from the urban landscape contributes a significant amount of pollution to local waters. As a result of the Clean Water Act, many communities in Northeast Wisconsin were issued a permit to control urban runoff pollution. As regulatory requirements increase to improve local waters, traditional funding sources to pay for practices to reduce the quantity and improve the quality of urban runoff have proved inadequate. Many communities have developed stormwater utilities to help fund the best management practices required by their permit. Stormwater utilities fund replacement of aged and deteriorating storm sewer infrastructure, continued growth and development and improvements to the storm drain system to meet floodplain and water quality goals.

Like other utilities, the stormwater utility charges fees to users in order to fund the services the utility provides. Most utilities assess fees based on the amount of impervious surface on a property. Impervious surfaces prevent water from soaking into the ground thus resulting in increased runoff. Increased runoff results in a greater burden to the storm sewer. Utilizing the amount of impervious surface because it directly correlates to the use of the drainage system has been proven an equitable way for a utility to assess fees.

Because the stormwater utility is funded by a user fee and not a tax, stormwater utilities have the ability to recognize efforts of individual property owners to reduce their use of the stormwater system through a reduction in the user's stormwater utility fee. This is often referred to as a credit.

Stormwater Credit programs are developed as a way to motivate and reward residents and business for helping to reduce the amount of runoff that flows into communities' drainage systems, potentially polluting local waters and harming the environment.

Implementation of stormwater credit programs, could result in multiple benefits for the community, the property owner and the waterways. These benefits include:

- Stormwater runoff reduction, resulting in improvements in downstream water quality.
- Existing privately-owned stormwater best management structures being maintained.
- Property owners installing best management practices and making choices that benefit the environment.
- An engaged community that takes ownership over increasing the conservation efforts in their neighborhoods.
- Increased knowledge of stormwater issues by the public.
- A lower stormwater fee for the customer.

Despite these possible benefits, there has not been widespread implementation of stormwater credit programs by communities nor widespread use of the credit program by residents in communities that have programs.

The ultimate goal of a credit program is to encourage users to pay for and maintain practices on their private property that will improve water quality at a lower cost than the municipality would pay to reduce the cost through public infrastructure. Many factors need to be considered when determining whether a credit program is effective in meeting that goal. The complexity of determining costs and benefits of stormwater best management practices on individual sites has led to a variety of credit programs developed throughout the region. There has not been one best approach determined for credit programs.

In addition to the complexity of determining costs and benefits, ensuring maintenance of the credit generating system also has to be included in the overall program of the credit system should the credit be based on water quality improvement.

It is for this reason, many utilities that offer credit to individual private property owners, use the results from the credit program towards meeting the public participation requirements of the stormwater permit and do not utilize the practices on private properties toward meeting water quality goals of the permit.

To meet and maintain water quality goals, changing behaviors of watershed residents will be critical. Changing behaviors takes time and commitment.

We recommend local municipalities with a stormwater utility develop a credit program or maintain the program they have. As permit requirements to improve the quality of urban runoff become more stringent the cost of municipal treatment may increase. As attitudes towards conservation change behavior the community may be able to rely on the green infrastructure practices installed on individual properties more than they currently do to meet water quality goals. Having a credit program in place may help a community meet their permit requirement in the future.

We recommend communities that have credit programs in place work to increase adoption of the program among its residents by increasing advertising and outreach of the program.

Suggestions for advertising the municipal stormwater credit programs include:

- Providing information about the credit program on the municipal website in an easy to find location
- Sharing details about the credit program on municipal social media accounts
- Create sharable videos about the program and the benefits of green infrastructure

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Website: www.fwwa.org
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- Include information about the program with utility bills or other municipal mailings
- Create a how-to-receive a credit on your stormwater utility bill flyer and make available at City Hall.