

Customer Service Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Stormwater Management Program (SWMP) and SW Utility Overview

Stormwater runoff drains off rooftops, driveways, sidewalks, parking lots, roads, compacted surfaces, and other impervious surfaces that prohibit the infiltration of rainfall into the ground. The stormwater runoff then flows into the City drainage system and, eventually, into our local creeks, wetland areas, and rivers. Most developed properties in the City contribute stormwater runoff to the City's public drainage system, or they rely on proper function of the City's street system and associated drainage network to access their property. Stormwater runoff contributes to flooding problems, and washes chemicals, debris, sediment, trash and other pollutants into the City drainage systems and our local surface water bodies.

The City of Duluth is responsible for the management and regulation of stormwater and drainage issues within the City. The City must undertake various activities including the cleaning of ditches and other stormwater conveyance systems; replacement of aging culverts and drainage structures; and construction of new culvert systems to increase or improve stormwater conveyance capacity. In recent years, management of stormwater runoff has become an increasingly important responsibility for local governments like Duluth. Expanding stormwater regulations, combined with aging infrastructure and deferred capital improvement projects, have driven the City's need to develop and execute a more comprehensive stormwater program to address drainage system maintenance issues, high priority capital projects and water quality issues.

The City is considering formation of a SW Utility to more effectively fund the stormwater management program through a system of user fees that will be dedicated solely to addressing stormwater management and drainage issues. The SW Utility would charge a user fee to cover the stormwater services provided to residences, businesses, institutions and government facilities. Please review the following FAQs for more information.

General Stormwater Management Questions

What is Stormwater Runoff? Stormwater runoff is water that flows over yards, streets, buildings, parking lots, and other impervious surfaces when it rains. Stormwater runoff flows into the City's stormwater drainage system and eventually flows into local streams, lakes and rivers.

Why is stormwater runoff a problem? Excessive stormwater runoff causes flooding, drainage system malfunction, adverse impacts to local waterways and water quality problems. Heavy rains can result in property damage especially if pipes fail and City streets collapse. Stormwater runoff also picks up pollutants and debris from streets, parking lots, yards, gravel parking areas, and other surfaces and carries them into local waterways.

General SW Utility Questions

What is a SW Utility? A SW Utility is an organizational and financial entity whose purpose is to manage and fund a local government stormwater program and to provide stormwater management services to customers. Each user of the system is charged a user fee and services are provided to the SW utility customers.

What is a Stormwater User Fee? A Stormwater User Fee is a charge for stormwater management services provided by the City to all developed residential and non-residential properties in the City. The user fee revenue collected can only be used for the provision of stormwater management services to customers within the City.

Why did the City decide on implementation of a SW Utility? In order to address stormwater program priorities and needs, the City determined that additional resources were required. Recent assessment work by the City has indicated that the City has approximately \$2 million of deferred drainage related projects that require immediate or near term attention. The primary funding options to implement these projects include either property taxes or SW Utility user fees. The City decided on the implementation of a SW Utility user fee because the City believes that user fee approach is a more fair and equitable approach than taxation for SWMP services. A SW Utility user fee is not based on the “assessed value” of a property, like a tax. Such a user fee is based on each customer’s demand on, or contribution of runoff to, the system and the services provided -- similar to water, sewer, sanitation, etc. An additional benefit of a SW Utility set up is that all stormwater user fee revenues must be spent on stormwater management and drainage related issues whereas tax revenues are not subject to such restrictions. Although the user fee is a new charge to residents and businesses for stormwater services, stormwater costs have always existed and were historically paid primarily from the City General Fund budget.

How are Duluth’s stormwater-related activities currently funded? Drainage system construction and maintenance repair activities have typically been funded by the City’s General Fund, which consists primarily of property tax. This funding source has proven to be unstable and unreliable from year to year due to the nature of competing priorities within the City’s annual budgeting process and local economic impacts (i.e. reduced property tax digest). The SW Utility is under consideration to fund a more comprehensive stormwater program without drawing funding away from other City priorities such as Public Safety. Funds collected by the SW Utility would only be spent on stormwater activities.

Who is required to pay a stormwater user fee? All developed properties within the City of Duluth would be charged a SW Utility user fee.

How is a stormwater user fee set for a particular developed property? The user fee charge is based on the amount of impervious surface on a developed parcel. Impervious surface means those areas which prevent or impede the natural infiltration of rainfall and stormwater runoff. Common impervious surfaces include, but are not limited to, rooftops, buildings or structures,

sidewalks, walkways, patio areas, driveways, parking lots, storage areas, awnings, and other partially impervious surfaces such as compacted soil and gravel. The square footage of impervious surface on a property has a direct correlation to the amount and quality of stormwater runoff discharged from that property. The basic theory is that larger parcels with greater amounts of impervious area will be charged a higher user fee based on the increased runoff amount and the increased demand placed on the City's drainage system.

Isn't this just another tax? No, a stormwater user fee charge is not a tax. Although the SW Utility fee is an additional cost to customers, it is not a tax because it bears little to no relation to the taxable value of a property. Customers will be charged a SW Utility fee if the property is developed, including "tax exempt" properties (i.e. churches, schools, local government facilities, etc.) because all developed properties generate stormwater runoff from their impervious surfaces and all receive stormwater services from the City.

How will the SW Utility user fee revenues be utilized by the City? Stormwater user fees collected under this program will provide additional resources to address numerous issues including the following: (1) drainage system maintenance issues in a more proactive manner; (2) maintain compliance with Federal, State and regional stormwater regulations; (3) meet water quality standards in local waterways; and (4) fund drainage related construction projects.

SW Utility Billing Procedures

How is the amount of impervious area calculated on properties within Duluth? The impervious area for each developed property within the City has been calculated using aerial photography and/or field verification methods.

What is the Duluth SW Utility user fee billing rate? The annual user fee charge for most DSFR customers is \$36 per year and the annual user fee charge for most ASFR customers is \$14.40 per year. NSFR customers would be charged \$36.00 per year for every 2,654 sq ft increment of impervious surface on their property.

Would churches and other tax-exempt properties required to pay? All properties within the City limits that have impervious areas in excess of 500 square feet would be charged a stormwater user fee regardless of ownership or tax status. All impervious surfaces (e.g. parking lots and rooftops) contribute stormwater runoff, and therefore, all customers should share the implementation cost of the City's SWMP.

How many other communities have stormwater utilities in Georgia? As of June 2011, it was estimated that approximately 45 stormwater utilities currently exist within the State of Georgia and more than 600 currently exist across the country.

Which communities in the Duluth area currently have stormwater utilities? Gwinnett County, Sugar Hill, Norcross, Snellville and Lawrenceville all currently charge stormwater user fees.

Why didn't the City just join the Gwinnett County SW Utility? The City carefully considered the proposal offered by the County in 2006 but decided that a City operated SW Utility could be operated more cost effectively for its property owners. Consequently, the proposed billing rate for the City SW Utility is approximately 45% less than what the County charges a customer with the same parcel characteristics.

Is there any way to reduce the stormwater user fee bill amount? Both residential and non-residential customers can apply for credits to reduce their stormwater user fee charge. The credits are based on specific structural and non-structural stormwater controls (or best management practices) that reduce the impact of a customer's stormwater runoff on the City's drainage system and/or assist the City in meeting its regulatory compliance requirements.

How will the City bill me for stormwater services? The City will bill customers using the City's property tax billing system to deliver the stormwater user fee bill to future customers in the most cost effective manner. In cases where a property does not receive a tax bill, the City would issue a separate stormwater bill to that parcel annually.

What if I think that my user fee charge bill has been calculated incorrectly? A customer service procedure will be established whereby you would contact the City Customer Service personnel and request a review of your bill.

How do I report a stormwater problem or to ask questions about the SW Utility? Please call 770-476-1790 and provide your name, address, phone number and a brief description of the drainage problem so that the City can further investigate the problem, or state your question to the City staff.