

# Studying Our Stormwater Utility: Frequently Asked Questions



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## **What is a Stormwater Utility?**

A Stormwater Utility is a legal entity which provides maintenance, improvements, planning, regulation, permitting and administrative functions for the Town of Winona Lake's stormwater collection system. A Stormwater Utility (like other Town Utilities) provides a method of generating revenues for these activities through user fees.

## **What is an ERU?**

An "Equivalent Residential Unit", or ERU, is a measure of the average amount of impervious surface area for a single-family residential property located in Winona Lake and is used to assess stormwater user fees. Much like a "kilowatt" serves as the basis for electrical utility, the ERU is the base unit for a stormwater utility. Many communities across Indiana have established stormwater utilities based on the ERU.

## **What is an impervious surface?**

Impervious surfaces are hardened surfaces which prevent or limit the natural entry of stormwater into the soil. Impervious surfaces include rooftops, streets, parking lots, driveways, patios, compacted gravel, asphalt, concrete, and other paved areas.

## **What is stormwater runoff?**

Because stormwater cannot be absorbed by impervious surfaces, the stormwater runs over the surface as stormwater runoff. Stormwater runoff must be managed through a stormwater collection system (pipes, culverts, ditches, swales, inlets, curb and gutter, detention ponds, etc.) to prevent standing water and flooding.

## **How are residential user fees determined?**

The Town is currently studying options for billing user fees and more information will be available in the coming months. Single-family residential

properties will likely be billed for 1 ERU per month. The fee per ERU has not yet been established.

## **How are non-residential user fees determined?**

The Town is studying fee options and the measuring of impervious surface areas will be completed over the next several months. Non-residential properties (businesses, industries, churches, schools, medical facilities, etc.) will likely be billed at a rate that is based on the amount of impervious area on their property. The fee per ERU has not yet been established.

## **How is stormwater affected by increased runoff?**

With increased amounts of impervious surface, more runoff is produced and it travels at higher speeds. This runoff picks up and carries pollutants to the stormwater collection system and eventually to receiving waters (lakes, ponds, rivers and streams). Large volumes of quickly flowing runoff will also erode soil, damage plants, and cause waters to become clouded and murky with sediments.

## **How is stormwater affected by increased pollutants?**

Within urbanized areas, impervious surfaces tend to collect a variety of pollutants including cleaning products; paint; oil, grease, and toxic chemicals from automobiles; road salts; pesticides and fertilizers from lawn maintenance and gardening; pet waste; litter; and eroded sediments. Increased amount of pollutants can harm fish and wildlife, kill native plants, contaminate drinking water supplies, and make recreational areas unsafe.

## **Are tax-exempt properties also exempt from the stormwater fee?**

No, because the stormwater user fee is a utility fee and not a tax. The stormwater user fee is assessed

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based on impervious surface area which correlates to the amount of runoff generated on that property.

## **Why do I have to pay a stormwater user fee?**

The Town is responsible for providing stormwater management facilities and services, including installation and maintenance of storm sewers, inlets and ditches. Funding is not provided by the federal or state government for these services, so the Town must establish a funding source. The revenue generated from the stormwater user fees can be used throughout the Town to improve the Town in the following ways:

- Fund storm sewer maintenance and drainage improvement projects.
- Provide maintenance of the existing storm sewer collection system (underground pipes, manholes, culvert pipes and storm catch basins).
- Repair erosion and scouring at stormwater outfalls.
- Repair ditch banks to provide stabilization.

## **Why isn't the stormwater management program funded by tax revenues?**

Tax revenues are not a reliable source of funding for stormwater management. Taxes are used to fund many Town programs. By allocating existing tax revenue for stormwater, it would require cuts to other programs. Taxes are based on assessed property value. In the instance of a stormwater user fee, based on impervious surface area, it more accurately reflects each property's contribution to stormwater runoff. Additionally, through stormwater user fees, tax exempt properties (that have impervious surfaces) will contribute a fair and equitable share towards the overall cost of the stormwater management program.

## **Are the sanitary and storm drain systems the same thing?**

Sanitary and storm sewers are not the same. Sanitary sewers collect wastewater from indoor plumbing. These "wastewaters" flow to our wastewater treatment plant. Storm drains collect stormwater, which is transported through pipes and ditches to streams and waterways. Stormwater does not receive treatment like wastewater. Open grates connect to the storm system and flow directly to a stream.

## **Why do I have to pay when I do not have any drainage problems?**

Everyone in the Town benefits from the Stormwater Management Program. If stormwater runs off your property, the Town must have a program and funding to manage the increase in runoff and pollutants. Additionally, the Town's program includes keeping streets from flooding, reviewing drainage plans for new development to ensure that your property is protected from upstream runoff when development occurs and maintaining and existing stormwater collection system infrastructure.

## **I have additional questions. Where can I get more information?**

If you would like additional information on the Stormwater Utility or have specific concerns about stormwater management issues, please contact

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