



Athens-Clarke County Stormwater Utility Fee Updates

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The Stormwater Management Program and Stormwater Utility Fee are a function of the Athens-Clarke County (ACC) Department of Transportation and Public Works. Any questions regarding this letter or the Stormwater Utility Fee should be directed to ACC Stormwater at **706-613-3440** or **stormwater@accgov.com**.

Why am I getting this letter?

This letter is to inform the public about ACC's Stormwater Management Program and provide additional information about the ongoing Stormwater Utility Fee review. The purpose of the fee review is to make the stormwater program more responsive to the desires of ratepayers while increasing the equity of the fee structure. Furthermore, one recurring stormwater challenge is addressing aging infrastructure.

Over the past two years, funds generated by the Stormwater Utility Fee have been used for emergency stormwater pipe repairs. Corrugated metal pipe was commonly used to convey stormwater runoff, and many of these pipes have become corroded and are at the end of their life spans. Annual stormwater fee revenue is unfortunately insufficient to address this aging infrastructure. Therefore, a Stormwater Utility Fee increase is being considered.

This information is being mailed along with water utility bills but the stormwater fee does not affect water rates. In fact, if you are currently a tenant renting a residence, you probably never see a stormwater bill. Property owners typically pay the stormwater fee associated with their property. It is anticipated that a separate notification will be mailed to stormwater fee customers with dates and times of upcoming public information meetings. More information will also be posted on our website at accgov.com/stormwater.

What is stormwater?

Stormwater is exactly what it sounds like; the water that falls during a storm. In terms of pollution and management, stormwater is both the water that falls from the sky as well as the water that runs off hard surfaces, commonly called stormwater runoff. Stormwater runoff flows over our rooftops, driveways, sidewalks, and roads into a system of ditches, storm drains, and stormwater pipes. Stormwater runoff in Athens-Clarke County is carried directly into our local streams, rivers, and ponds without first passing through a treatment plant. This is called a municipal separate storm sewer system, or MS4, because it is separate from the sanitary sewer system. We are designated by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division as a MS4 community based on our population density. This means ACC is required to comply with the Clean Water Act and meet the requirements of the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase II MS4 Permit.

Why should we care about stormwater?

Stormwater runoff picks up various chemicals and pollutants that can contaminate our local waterways, which are the source of our drinking water. These pollutants include everything from grass clippings and pet waste to sediment, pesticides, fertilizers, oil, pathogens, and toxic chemicals. Although it may seem like rainwater completely absorbs into the ground on our individual properties, if it rains enough, stormwater will flow off everyone's property and into our drainage system, whether we notice this runoff or not.

Uncontrolled stormwater can have detrimental effects on the environmental and financial health of a community. For one, stormwater pollution can make our local waters unsafe for fishing, swimming, and boating. Also, improperly managed stormwater can lead to the erosion of our riverbanks and flooding of our streets. The Clean Water Act requires MS4 communities to manage stormwater through a comprehensive stormwater management program. This act ensures that residents can be confident their local communities are working diligently to protect the waters in their area.

What is the Stormwater Utility Fee?

While it is completely separate from water fees or electricity fees, the ACC Stormwater Utility is just like other utilities that serve the community in that users pay a fee for services rendered. The user-based Stormwater Utility Fee ensures customers pay their fair share, and no one subsidizes non-ratepayers. This method also presents our community with an alternative to a property tax increase, which would exempt some of the largest service users in the community (UGA, government buildings, churches, etc.). The purpose of the stormwater fee is to raise revenues needed to fund our Clean Water Act requirements as well as the necessary maintenance of our stormwater infrastructure. This infrastructure includes metal pipes – many of which have become badly rusted. Services to ratepayers include (but are not limited to) water quality sampling, investigation of illegal discharges, cleaning of storm drains, curbs, and pipes, flood reduction projects, construction site erosion prevention, street sweeping, educational programs, and maintenance of infrastructure that ensures our roads don't flood when it rains.

How is the fee currently calculated?

There are a number of factors that influence the amount and quality of water flowing off of a property. To approximate demand on the stormwater system, the amount of hard surface area, such as rooftops and driveways, is the main factor used to estimate stormwater runoff. Everyone who has land with hard surfaces (often called impervious surfaces) that prevents rain from soaking into the ground pays the stormwater fee, regardless of whether that property is subject to property taxes. This distributes the fee more equitably than taxes. A recent survey of ACC residents showed that the overwhelming majority of respondents support tax-exempt properties contributing to the Stormwater Utility Fee. This approach also provides an incentive for property owners to minimize the amount of impervious surfaces constructed on their property thereby reducing stormwater impacts.

Why do I have to pay the Stormwater Utility Fee?

The stormwater fee pays for public benefits such as street drainage and clean water in streams. These activities ensure safe and effective conveyance of public stormwater while maintaining safe access to all developed property. Much like water and sewer fees, the stormwater fee supports only the public stormwater system, and it is unable to address private drainage problems. If stormwater fee revenue was used to fix all of the drainage problems in private property owners' yards, the fee would be much higher than it is now. Everyone benefits from a safe and effective public stormwater system, so all property owners with impervious surface contribute. When it comes to safe roads and clean water, we are all in this together.

Can you tell me more about the current Stormwater Utility Fee review?

Athens-Clarke County is currently working with Stantec Consulting to conduct a comprehensive review of the Stormwater Utility Fee. This review consists of two phases. The first phase, which was completed in December 2018, looked at the existing level and extent of stormwater services, as well as a funding strategy for fixing failing stormwater pipes.

The second phase, which will take place from January to March 2019, will examine the current rate structure and credit system. Credits allow stormwater customers to reduce their fees. We are looking for additional ways to give people credit for practices that reduce stormwater runoff and/or reduce the cost burden to ACC for implementation of the Stormwater Management Program. This improves the fairness of our fee system.

How can I get involved?

To stay updated on the fee review, please visit our webpage at accgov.com/stormwater and click on the “2018-2019 Stormwater Utility Fee Review” link found on the menu on the left side of the page. You may also sign-up for text or email updates on that page. There will be several opportunities for you to provide feedback during the next phase, including regional open house meetings and an online comment form. If you would like a member of the Stormwater Team to come speak with your neighborhood, business, or civic group about stormwater issues or the Utility Fee, please contact us at **706-613-3440** or by emailing stormwater@accgov.com. You can also find more information on the Stormwater Management Program, the Stormwater Utility, the fee review, as well as tips on how to prevent stormwater pollution at accgov.com/stormwater.