



Mill Pond, Ashland, MA - view from Main Street

Why Pay For Stormwater

“Warning! Do Not Eat,” reads the sign posted in strategic locations at our otherwise idyllic Mill Pond, the legacy of decades of environmental insensitivity and abuse. “Our environment is precious and delicate,” said Doug Small, Director of the Ashland Department of Public Works. “We have learned from society's previous mistakes on not protecting our lakes, rivers, and streams, and we finally have a chance to prevent these mistakes from happening again.”

The *chance* referred to by Small is the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (NPDES MS4) – a big mouth full of words that stormwater people simply refer to as MS4. Its purpose is to reduce pollution and to improve water quality. As many in Ashland know only too well, pollution poisons our ground water, streams, rivers and lakes. This mandated program is designed to ensure that Ashland has controls in place to minimize the chances of more pollutants being dumped in our precious water bodies. A cleaner environment is a healthier environment. The program also encourages ‘harvesting’ or retaining more of our stormwater, a definite benefit for our water-short community.

The new MS4 permit became effective on July 1, and it requires that Ashland have and begin to implement a comprehensive stormwater management plan in this fiscal year. The plan must include public participation such as the creation of the Stormwater Advisory Committee, and public outreach such as educating the public about pollution and articles like the one you are now reading. The intent is to make us, all of us, aware of what we must do to reduce stormwater pollution (the subject of past and future articles).

Another set of requirements is a Green Infrastructure Program – things like green-roof designs, water-harvesting and improved street and parking lot designs – all designed to save stormwater. The water-barrels that some residents have installed is one small piece of this program.

New construction must be done more carefully with regard to pollution, and that will require re-writing and stricter enforcement of our bylaws. In addition, during the permit period, we must inspect and prioritize all municipal properties for possible retrofitting to improve stormwater management.

MS4 also dictates that the DPW must improve ‘municipal good housekeeping’ – actions we have done for years like street cleaning and storm drain cleaning and maintenance but we must now do more of it more often and better. MS4 requires the Town to identify and remediate the sources of stormwater pollution in the town – what the EPA calls Illicit Discharge. We must identify, map, and keep records on every piece of our stormwater infrastructure. We must test stormwater for pollutants and, once identified, we must reduce the pollution to acceptable levels, what is called the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL).

“We have a plan that lays out the things we must do in each of the five years”, said Small. “We have estimated the costs and now we need to figure out how we are going to pay for it.”

The Advisory Committee has been working closely with Small and the DPW on program cost estimates -- about \$1.5 million over the five-year permit period. As reported in last month’s article (See: Stormwater Dilemma: How Will Residents Comply With The New Law”) because the Town’s budget is capped by proposition 2 1/2 the committee has recommended the creation of a Stormwater Utility called an Enterprise Fund (E-fund).

The Stormwater Utility will charge a fee to property owners and commercial enterprises. Non-tax-paying organizations will also be charged. The goal, says the committee, is to make this fee small, fair and equitable including a somewhat reduced fee for seniors. This fee would be similar to what other towns and cities in Massachusetts charge (see chart), likely in the range of \$40 per year for homeowners. That works out to a little more than \$3 per month or 2% of what many of us pay for cable. In the future, the town may offer incentives for *green infrastructure* items like green roofs, rain-gardens and permeable driveways.

Can the Town choose to ignore MS4? “Not really,” said Small. “Failure to comply with the mandate can result in fines of as much as \$35,000 per day.”

Will this stormwater ‘investment’ pay off? We don’t have to look far for an answer. Once the subject of pollution jokes, the Charles River is now swimmable, and Boston Harbor, once regarded as an open sewer, is substantially cleaner. Perhaps one day Waushakum Pond and the Sudbury River will also be more swimmable.

“We can look at this as something that is forced upon us, which in a way it is” said Maeghan Dos Anjos, Ashland’s Conservation Agent and ex-officio member of SWAC, “but it is far more constructive to regard it as an opportunity, to create a cleaner, healthier, more sustainable, more live-able town.”

Chart

Annual Residential¹ Stormwater Rates in Other Towns

Chelmsford	\$40/yr.
Chicopee	\$100/yr.
Fall River	\$140/yr.
Longmeadow	\$27/yr.
Milton ²	\$32 - 468/yr.
Newton	\$75/yr.
Northampton ²	\$64 - 259/yr.
Reading	\$40/yr.
Westfield	\$20/yr.

¹Commercial and other property fees are based on impervious area

²Variable based on impervious area