



**Colchester**  
VERMONT

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# Stormwater Utility FAQs

The Town of Colchester is proposing a Stormwater Utility beginning July 1, 2017. This was a recommendation from the Integrated Water Resources Management Plan completed in 2013. In 2015, the Town created the Stormwater Advisory Committee (SWAC). The SWAC consists of eleven Colchester citizens of varying backgrounds and interests. The SWAC has been developing the utility with Town staff for the past 18 months, and defined the purpose of the utility as follows:

*“To create a comprehensive storm water management program which will: 1) provide an adequate and equitable funding mechanism to allow the Town to shift toward more proactive management of storm water infrastructure in Colchester; 2) address and clean up the Town’s most critical sources of sediment and phosphorus to local streams and Lake Champlain; and 3) ensure higher quality and better protected surface waters and water resources throughout the Town.”*

Some of the more common questions asked about stormwater utilities are listed below:

## **What is stormwater?**

When rain falls, it is generally absorbed into the earth unless there is something covering the ground, like a driveway, parking lot, building, or some other compacted or impervious surface. This water that cannot be absorbed by the ground is called stormwater.

## **Why is stormwater a problem?**

When stormwater runs off the land, it picks up and carries pollutants along the way such as automobile fluids, pesticides, fertilizers, pet wastes, bacteria, and sediment. All of these pollutants eventually end up in our streams, rivers, and Lake Champlain. Currently the State of Vermont and the U.S EPA consider Lake Champlain and several streams throughout the state, including two in Colchester, to be impaired by stormwater pollutants. When stormwater is not properly managed, it also causes street flooding, insect problems and other health risks from standing water, and property damage related to basement flooding and erosion problems.

## **How is stormwater managed by the Town?**

All new development is required to meet strict standards to control the volume and treatment of stormwater. However, much of the development predates these requirements. In many areas of Town, stormwater systems were never built. The Town also regularly maintains and repairs the existing public stormwater system. The system consists of approximately 2,500 stormwater structures, as well as many miles of pipe and culverts. However, with much of this system being quite old, many portions of the system are in need of replacement. The current estimate for all needed stormwater improvements in Town is approximately \$35 million.

### **How are stormwater projects and maintenance currently funded?**

All stormwater projects and maintenance are currently funded by property tax dollars. The amount that each taxable property owner pays for stormwater is based on the assessed value of their property. Those properties that are exempt from property taxes, such as federal or state owned property or non-profits, do not contribute toward the Town's stormwater program, regardless of how much stormwater they generate.

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

A Stormwater Utility is similar to a sewer utility or water utility. It is a Town department which generates revenues through fees for service. A stormwater utility is responsible for funding the operation, maintenance, and construction of the public stormwater system, and for stormwater system planning and management. A stormwater utility generates its revenue through user fees that are assessed to all properties regardless of their tax status, and the revenues from the stormwater charges go into a separate fund that may only be used for stormwater services.

### **Are Stormwater utilities something new?**

There are approximately 2,000 stormwater utilities in the United States as of the most recent survey in 2014. Three communities in Vermont also have stormwater utilities; Burlington (2009), South Burlington (2010), and Williston (2015).

### **How was the Stormwater Utility developed in Colchester?**

The development of a stormwater utility was a recommendation from the Integrated Water Resources Management Plan. Completed in 2013, this was a four year study which included 16 public meetings. The purpose of the study was to determine the best ways to improve and protect the Town's extensive natural resources. In 2015, the Town created the Stormwater Advisory Committee, (SWAC). The SWAC consists of eleven Colchester citizens of varying backgrounds and interests. Among these eleven citizens are a member of the Town's Selectboard, Planning Commission, and the Conservation Commission. Over the past 18 months, the SWAC has worked with Town staff to develop the Stormwater Utility.

### **What are the benefits of a Stormwater Utility?**

*It will provide a more adequate and equitable funding plan for stormwater management* – Current funding is inadequate to address Colchester's current stormwater needs. Property taxes are a poor way to fund stormwater as the assessed value of a property has little to do with how much stormwater a property creates. Many properties, including very large properties creating significant amounts of stormwater are exempt from property taxes, and therefore pay nothing toward the Town's stormwater program. This includes the Vermont Agency of Transportation who has a significant amount of impervious surface in Colchester associated with the interstate and state highway system. Stormwater is the only utility that is not currently paid for on the basis of how much is used or generated.

*It will allow the preservation, protection, and improved management of water resources into the future* – The Town has approximately 30 miles of shoreline, 107 miles of stream and rivers, 232 acres of inland waters, and 3,429 acres of wetlands covering 14% of the Town. The U.S. EPA has listed Sunderland and Morehouse Brook as impaired by stormwater. The Town's smaller streams have phosphorus levels well above the standards as developed by the State of Vermont, and phosphorus levels in Lake Champlain exceed the acceptable levels established for these waters.

*It will address inadequate and failing stormwater systems* – Much of the Town's stormwater systems pre-date modern stormwater design requirements and regulations resulting in poorly treated stormwater and pollution of the community's water resources. Under current funding levels, routine maintenance must often be deferred. Much of the Town's stormwater system has reached the end of its useful life and must be replaced. Many areas of Town have no stormwater systems resulting in localized flooding, property damage, and a negative effect on quality of life.

#### **What will my stormwater fee be based on?**

Stormwater fees are based on the square footage of impervious surface for each property. There is a direct relationship between the area of impervious surface and the amount of stormwater generated from each property. However, all properties in Town will receive at least a minimum fee, even if there is no impervious surface on the property. Stormwater and water quality is a Town wide issue that affects all property owners and requires a Town-wide approach.

#### **How will the stormwater fee be calculated?**

There are two property categories; single family residential and non-single family residential properties. Single family residential properties generally include single family homes, duplexes, and triplexes, or any combination of these that does not exceed three dwelling units, and that have less than 1 acre of impervious surface. All other properties are considered non-single family residential properties. The total impervious surface for each single family residential property is determined and then averaged. This average square footage is 4,536 square feet, and is considered to be one Equivalent Residential Unit, or ERU. On a Town wide basis, there are a total of 16,696 ERU's. Based upon a stormwater program budget of \$874,737, the fee for each ERU is \$52.39 per year. ( $\$874,737/16,696 \text{ ERU's} = \$52.39$ )

#### **How is the amount of impervious area calculated on properties in Town?**

The Town worked with the University of Vermont's Spatial Analysis Lab to look at aerial photography and combined it with parcel and property ownership information. The impervious area was broken down into five types:

- Buildings
- Dirt Roads
- Dirt Parking areas, driveways, and sidewalks
- Paved Roads
- Paved parking areas, driveways, and sidewalks

The Town then contracted with the engineering firm of Hoyle, Tanner & Associates to calculate the amount of impervious surface on each property in town.

**What will my stormwater fee be?**

All single family residential properties will receive a flat fee of 1 ERU, or \$52.39 per year which equates to \$4.36 per month. For non-single family residential properties, their actual square footage of impervious surface will be divided by the square footage equivalent of 1 ERU which is 4,536 square feet. This will determine how many ERU's exist on these properties which will then be multiplied by the ERU rate of \$52.39 per year.

**Will the stormwater fee be the only charge from the Town for stormwater?**

No. There is a significant amount of impervious surface within the community that is owned by the Town at large. This includes roads, parking lots, Town buildings, etc. The Town will need to pay stormwater fees for these areas. The revenues to pay these fees will need to be collected as property taxes. It is estimated that a \$275,000 home will pay \$18.73 per year in property taxes for stormwater in addition to the stormwater fee of \$52.39 for a total of \$71.12 per year.

**How does this compare to what I currently pay for stormwater?**

The current stormwater program budget is \$541,720 per year. A single family residential property with an average price of \$275,000 currently pays about \$71.81 per year in property taxes for these services. The stormwater utility budget program will be increased to \$874,737 per year which will allow increased maintenance and capital construction and repair. However the total cost to a \$275,000 home will be reduced to \$71.12 per year. This is possible through a more equitable distribution of costs throughout the community, including collecting stormwater user fees from those properties that are exempt from property taxes. For non-single family residential properties, the costs will vary from property to property depending upon the assessed value of the property, and the amount of impervious surface.

**Who pays the stormwater fee?**

All property owners in town, including those that do not pay property taxes. Properties with no impervious surface will also pay the minimum charge of 1 ERU, or \$52.39 per year.

**How will billing be done?**

Individual bills will be sent to each property owner by the Town. Billing will be done once per year.

**Are there opportunities to reduce my bill?**

Non-single family residential properties will be eligible for credits as outlined in a credit manual. These credits adjust the owner's fee based on the stormwater management strategies they use on their site. Single-family residential properties will not be eligible for credits.

### **What will the money go towards?**

The Town has developed multiple stormwater improvement projects for the Sunderland Brook and Morehouse Brook watersheds, and is currently developing a comprehensive stormwater management system for Malletts Bay and its upland watersheds. Pollutant levels in these waters are above permitted limits and require immediate attention. The current estimate for this work is approximately \$12 million. Additional capital work includes the repair or replacement of \$7.7 million in aging stormwater infrastructure, and the investment of \$14.8 million in areas of Town where no stormwater infrastructure was ever constructed. Stormwater revenues will also fund operation and maintenance costs, administrative functions such as management, planning, regulatory compliance, and billing, and also increased public education and outreach. Capital construction and reconstruction will be increased by 47%, while maintenance to the existing system will be increased by about 70%.

### **Will there be any additional Town employees?**

A Stormwater Coordinator will be hired to oversee the utility and will be paid for entirely through stormwater fees. Currently stormwater management is done by several Town employees within the Public Works Department, each addressing a piece of the overall stormwater responsibilities. There is currently no single person focusing entirely on stormwater and water quality. The Stormwater Coordinator position will allow this single point of focus and management, while other public works employees can increase their focus on transportation, fleet management, facilities management, wastewater, engineering, capital construction, grant procurement, and Town-wide infrastructure planning.

### **How will the Stormwater Utility be implemented?**

The stormwater utility will be implemented through an amendment of the Town's Stormwater Ordinance by the Colchester Selectboard. The Ordinance amendment will follow the standard public hearing and approval process.

For more information, please contact Bryan K. Osborne, Director of Public Works at 264-5625, or [bosborne@colchestervt.gov](mailto:bosborne@colchestervt.gov).