

Creating stormwater utility was right move

December 12, 2010

Rain is free, but getting rid of it is expensive. Last week the Salem City Council acted responsibly by voting to gradually make those costs more equitable.

It was a good decision and one that reflects the tough times that local businesses still face.

The council created a stormwater utility that will take effect no later than January 2013. What that means is property owners will be billed separately for the city's costs of collecting stormwater. Currently, those costs — including street sweeping and maintaining the stormwater drainage system — are lumped in with city sewage charges.

This is not a new tax or fee; neither will it generate additional money for the city. It is a realignment of who pays what. The stormwater utility will tie rates to the impacts created by urban runoff. Some property owners will pay more; some less, which is why the proposal initially was highly controversial.

Heed public concerns

Overall, taxpayers are the winner because, in many ways, the city's handling of this issue has exemplified local government at its best:

-Salem's public works staff spent a year discussing the proposal with property owners, neighborhood associations, business groups and others. Staff members conducted more than 50 meetings, which were noteworthy for their civil give-and-take.

-The council had a robust debate on the latest proposal Monday instead of simply rubber-stamping a staff recommendation. Extensive debate is essential to a healthy democracy that respects citizen input.

-The city adopted a plan that fits Salem's needs instead of simply copying what other cities have done. City staff made numerous changes throughout the year to address property owners' concerns, especially those of large businesses and non-profits. The final plan spreads the basic charge more evenly, lessening some of the impact on organizations with big parking lots.

Salem's rate will be at the low end of what other municipal stormwater utilities charge. For a property with 100,000 square feet of impervious surface, the approximate monthly rate in Salem will be \$194, compared with \$164 in Keizer, \$190 in Hillsboro, \$219 in Corvallis, \$250 in Beaverton, \$393 in Eugene and \$872 in Portland.

-The Salem council understood the current economy and how businesses operate. Now is not a time to impose higher costs on businesses. The council decided that the new system will take effect after the Salem-area unemployment rate drops to 7.5 percent for one quarter of the year — three consecutive months — or Jan. 1, 2013, whichever occurs first.

Link

City document about potential rates and other details of the stormwater utility, as presented to the Salem City Council on Dec. 6:

And then the rates will be phased in over three years, with the stormwater utility in full effect by January 2016.

Help businesses

Businesses want certainty from government, which that schedule provides. Property owners, including companies looking to locate or expand in Salem, can plan for how the rates will affect them.

Many homeowners will pay less. Many businesses, non-profits, schools, government agencies and churches eventually will pay more because they have large expanses of impervious surface — roofs and paved parking lots — that block water from soaking into the ground.

That run-off is a significant source of water pollution, as well as flooding. The rainwater rolls off those hard surfaces, collecting oil and other pollutants before entering the city's system of stormwater drains, which empty into creeks and streams. Eventually the untreated, potentially polluted water flows into the Willamette and its tributaries.

That's why it's better to wash a car on a lawn than a driveway. The ground will filter out some of the pollutants before the water seeps into streams. Similarly, an increasing number of commercial operations, from car washes to office buildings, have installed systems for recycling water and separating out the oil and other pollutants.

See costs, benefits

The stormwater utility will have at least two advantages for property owners:

-They can see the cost of rainfall on their property. Commercial, industrial and other large property owners can reduce their costs if they take measures to reduce runoff, to recycle the runoff into landscape fountains and other water features, or to reclaim pollutants. Such measures also can reduce the potential for urban flooding, as well as making the property more attractive through related landscaping.

-They can see where their money goes as the city responds to increased state or federal requirements for handling run-off.

For a community that prides itself on its environment, the new stormwater utility makes sense. For a community that needs to rebuild its economy, the city's thoughtful and even-handed approach sends a positive signal to businesses.

Our Viewpoint