Town finds answer to drainage problems by forming stormwater utility

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Being first is always difficult. As the old saying goes, you can always tell pioneers-they're the ones lying face down on the lone prairie with arrows in their backs. Until last July there were no stormwater utilities in the State of Georgia. Now there is one very successful stormwater utility and many more in the planning stages.

Stormwater management is a growing concern in Georgia due to:

- the passage of the Phase II EPA stormwater quality regulations,
- deteriorating local drainage infrastructure,
- growing flooding complaints,
- lawsuits which have defined local governmental responsibility more stringently, and
- state mandates in support of wastewater re-permitting and drinking water protection.

As a result, municipalities are now struggling with the problem of how to fund these programs without adversely impacting other municipal services. Enter stormwater utilities.

A stormwater utility can provide a convenient vehicle for consolidating or coordinating responsibilities that were previously dispersed among several departments and divisions, generating program funding, and developing programs that are comprehensive, cohesive and consistent year-to-year.

Stormwater utilities have a proven track record of revenue stability, equitability of charges and revenue sufficiency.

A stormwater utility is equitable because the cost is borne by the user on the basis of the user's demand placed on the drainage system.

It is stable because it is not as dependent on the vagaries of the annual budgetary process as taxes.

It is adequate because a typical stormwater program can be financed with payments below the normal customer willingness to pay, especially if the public education program clearly spells out the "bang for the buck." The national average monthly charge is just under $3 per household.

Since the late 1970s, the use of stormwater utilities for financing urban stormwater programs has grown rapidly in popularity in the United States. There are well over 300 such utilities presently in existence in the United States and many more in the planning stages. Griffin has led the way in Georgia in planning and implementing such a utility, having sent its first bill out in July, 1998.

Griffin was prime candidate for creation of a stormwater utility Griffin is located 45 minutes south of Atlanta and has a population of about 24,000. It is facing a growing list of stormwater-related problems and issues including: a deteriorating drainage system, several neighborhoods which flooded periodically, areas with no

drainage, "unplanned" channels eroded from street runoff, and little funding. In addition Griffin was facing suspected, but unknown, water quality problems and potential regulatory requirements.

Knowing that stable, adequate and equitable funding was a prerequisite to any eventual success, in 1997 the City of Griffin's Public Works Director Brant Keller contracted with Ogden Environmental and Energy Services, Inc. and Water Resource Associates, Inc. to assist in setting up a stormwater utility.

The Ogden team took the city through a logical two-step action plan process in the development of the utility. An action plan pays for itself several times over in the actual implementation of the utility, and it can provide a convenient way to "test the waters" of political and public support for the concept prior to full commitment. It is useful even if the utility is not developed in helping a local government get a handle on its stormwater program needs and direction.

The plan for Griffin included:

- defining the existing stormwater program in terms of: staffing, financial resources and sources, activities, and controls and systems;
- assessing the existing and anticipated problems, needs and issues now facing the city;
- determining stormwater program priorities in each of the key program areas of: administration and finance, operations and maintenance, engineering and planning, regulation and enforcement, capital construction, environmental programs, special support functions, and other miscellaneous overhead and staff support needs;
- estimating the resources and costs for a three- to five-year stormwater program, with less detailed planning out to ten years;
- determining funding feasibility for a suite of potential funding methods, policies, and financial sources;
- planning for public information and education; and
- determining how to develop the billing database.

Once it was determined that the planned stormwater program concept was agreeable to both citizens and the city decision makers, and that a stormwater utility was feasible and acceptable, final development and implementation of the utility began.

The development followed along four parallel and interconnected "tracks": program, finance, billing and public education, in a building block fashion.

In Griffin's case the charge is $2.95 per month per residence, or per every 2200 square feet of impervious area on nonresidential properties. The utility is expected to generate about $1.2 million dollars per year.

Several moves played role in Griffin success

Several actions appear to have been the keys to success for the Griffin program.

First, the support of key elected officials was solicited early in the process, and they were made to feel comfortable with the need, the approach, and the expected results (bang for the buck).

Also, realizing it was a "one chance" opportunity, a consultant with a proven track record in a wide variety of settings and one who had been "first" in a number of states was retained.

A truthful and direct approach with the general public and key stakeholders was also important. A clear message was crafted which focused on results, not fees. Expectations were controlled by stressing the utility was a key step but only one step toward solutions.

A sound program and "sales" strategy was developed and followed through tough times and good.

A final action that is believed to have played in the success was the fact that one person was in charge of all aspects of the work and became the focal point and major cheerleader for the utility's development.

An interesting by-product of the utility is that it opened the door for other sources of funding through an enhanced ability to provide matching funding and through enhancing a reputation as a community that was committed to stormwater management. Public works secured significant grants and loans, including:

- a $725,000 Georgia Emergency Management Agency grant to remediate severe flooding problems;
- one million dollars in special local option sales tax funds for capital construction of stormwater projects;
- funds up to $158,000 from a non-point source pollution grant from the state to install a bio-retention pond;
- state revolving fund money loans (3 3/4% with 2% closing costs) for six stormwater projects in the amount of $2.6 million; and
- a planned stormwater utility-backed revenue bond in 2001.

Griffin has begun to implement the plan to increase its staff and to purchase and implement GIS and GPS capabilities to help meet critical remedial maintenance, water quality and capital construction needs. It has also begun the process of planning and situating itself to be ready for NPDES Phase II in terms of instituting an action plan, in many ways similar to the stormwater utility action plan which initiated the current program.

In summary, the keys to Griffin's success include a strong technical and public relations approach, political backing, focused flooding problems needing to be addressed, and a local staff champion willing to invest the time and effort to insure success.