

## **GARDEN CITY STORMWATER UTILITY (SW UTILITY)**

### **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

The following frequently asked questions are provided for informational purposes to help educate the SW Utility customers. The information is based on the more detailed information contained in the SW Utility Enterprise Fund Ordinance, SW Utility Rate Ordinance and the SW Utility Credit Manual as well as other supporting documents. Customers can download these documents from the City's website and review them in detail, if desired.

#### **Stormwater Management Program (SWMP) and SW Utility Overview**

Stormwater runoff drains off rooftops, driveways, sidewalks, parking lots, roads, compacted soil, gravel, and other surfaces that prohibit the infiltration of rainfall into the ground. The stormwater runoff then flows into the City drainage system and, eventually, into our local creeks, wetland areas, canals and ultimately to the Savannah River, or recharges the local groundwater table. Most developed properties in the City contribute stormwater runoff to the drainage system, or they rely on proper function of the City's street system and associated drainage network to ingress and egress their property. Stormwater runoff contributes to flooding problems, and washes chemicals, debris, sediment, trash and other pollutants into the City drainage systems and our local surface water bodies.

Management of stormwater runoff has become an increasingly important responsibility for local governments like the Garden City. Existing stormwater regulations, combined with aging infrastructure and deferred capital improvement projects, have driven the City's need to develop and implement a more comprehensive SWMP to achieve compliance with State and Federal Stormwater Management Regulations as well as address drainage system maintenance issues and high priority capital projects. The City SWMP is responsible for the management and regulation of all drainage issues within the City. The SWMP must undertake various activities including the cleaning of ditches and other stormwater conveyance systems; replacement of aging culverts and drainage structures; and construction of new culvert systems to increase or improve stormwater conveyance capacity. A SW Utility is being formed to more effectively manage the overall SWMP and to fund the program through a system of user fees that will be dedicated solely to addressing stormwater management and drainage issues. The SW Utility will provide services to residences, businesses, institutions and government facilities.

## **General Stormwater Management Questions**



**What is Stormwater Runoff?** Stormwater runoff is water that flows over yards, streets, buildings, parking lots, and other surfaces when it rains. Stormwater runoff flows into local streams, canals and wetland areas and eventually ends up in the Savannah River, or recharges the local groundwater table.

**How does stormwater get into our streams?** When it rains, stormwater runoff flows into street gutters, drainage ditches, storm sewers, and other conveyance systems that discharge into our creeks, streams and canals. These natural drainage systems convey the stormwater runoff to larger bodies of water such as the Savannah River. Some of the stormwater runoff eventually infiltrates into the groundwater table.

**Why is stormwater runoff a problem?** Excessive stormwater runoff causes flooding, drainage system malfunction, adverse impacts to local waterways and water quality problems. Heavy rains flood streets and yards and can result in property damage. Stormwater runoff also picks up pollutants and debris from streets, parking lots, yards, gravel parking areas, and other surfaces and carries them into local waterways. The SW Utility will provide a fair, equitable, and stable source of funding for the City to utilize in addressing the numerous stormwater management issues.

## **SW Utility Questions**

**What is a SW Utility?** A SW Utility is an organizational and financial entity whose purpose is to manage and fund a local government SWMP and to provide stormwater management services to customers. Each user of the system is charged a user fee and services are provided.

**What is a Stormwater User Fee?** A Stormwater User Fee is a charge for stormwater management services provided by the City to all developed residential and non-residential properties in the City. The user fee revenue collected can only be used for the provision of stormwater management services to customers within the City.

**Who is required to pay a Stormwater User Fee?** All developed properties within Garden City are charged a SW Utility user fee.

**How is a Stormwater User Fee set?** The user fee charge is based on the amount of impervious surfaces on a developed parcel. Impervious surface means those areas which prevent or impede the natural infiltration of rainfall and stormwater runoff. Common impervious surfaces include, but are not limited to, rooftops, buildings or structures, sidewalks, walkways, patio areas, driveways, parking lots, storage areas, awnings and other fabric or plastic coverings, and other surfaces such as compacted soil

and gravel. The square footage of impervious surface on a property has a direct correlation to the stormwater runoff discharged from that property. The basic theory is that larger parcels with greater amounts of impervious area will be charged a higher user fee based on the increased runoff amount and the increased demand placed on the City's drainage system.

**Are gravel and compacted soil charged at the same rate as other types of impervious surfaces?** No, gravel and compacted soil are charged at a reduced rate of 90% to account for the minor amount of superficial infiltration that can occur. This 90% factor is based on the literature data and the hydrologic characteristics of these types of materials as compared to pre-development conditions. For example, a site with 10,000 square feet of compacted soil and gravel "impervious surface" would be charged for an equivalent of 9,000 square feet of asphalt.

**Isn't this just another tax?** A stormwater user fee charge is not a tax. Although the SW Utility fee is an additional cost to customers, it is not a tax because it bears little to no relation to the taxable value of a property. Customers will be charged a SW Utility fee if the property is developed, including "tax exempt" properties (i.e. churches, schools, local government facilities, etc.) all of which generate stormwater runoff from their impervious surfaces.

**How are the Stormwater Utility User Fee Charges utilized by the City?** Stormwater user fees collected under this program will be utilized to provide for additional resources to address drainage system maintenance issues in a more proactive manner; achieve compliance with Federal, State and regional stormwater regulations; maintain water quality standards in local waterways; and fund drainage related construction projects.

**How does the City plan to fix flooding problems?** The City proposes to address the recurring flooding problems identified in the City's SWMP through the SW Utility. Establishment of the SW Utility and the stormwater user fee system will allow the City to collect funds for use to implement high priority SWMP elements/activities as well as drainage related projects.

**In the past, how were stormwater-related activities funded?** Prior to the SW Utility, drainage system construction and maintenance repair activities were funded by the City's General Fund which consists primarily of Local Option Sales Tax (LOST) and other taxes – but not traditional property tax. This process proved to be both unreliable and unstable from year to year due to the nature of competing priorities within the City's annual budgeting process and local economic impacts (i.e. reduced sales tax revenues). The SW Utility has been established to fund a more comprehensive SWMP without drawing funding away from other City priorities such as Public Safety. Funds collected by the SW Utility can only be spent on the SWMP in accordance with applicable City Ordinances.

**If the stormwater runs off my property directly into a County Canal and does not enter into the Garden City drainage system, do I have to pay a user fee charge?** If the runoff from a developed property never enters the City's public drainage system at any point downstream then a customer would be eligible for a *No Direct Discharge Credit* of up to 50% off their monthly user fee charge amount per the City's SW Utility Credit Manual.

**Can I get a 100% credit on my Stormwater Utility User Fee bill?** Implementation of the City's SWMP benefits all developed property owners to some degree and these benefits may be direct, or indirect, or immeasurable. For example, the City's existing National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase I Municipal Separate Storm Sewer (MS4) Stormwater Permit requires that the City address stormwater runoff issues throughout its entire jurisdictional boundary. Another example would be that most every developed property utilizes to some degree the City's public street system, and the SWMP is responsible for maintaining the functional operation of the drainage systems associated with City streets. Based on this information, it is not practical for a customer to receive more than a 50% credit on their user fee charge even if they do not directly discharge stormwater runoff to the City drainage system. For more information on User Fee Credits, please see the City's Stormwater Utility Credit Manual.

### **SW Utility Billing Procedures**

**How is the amount of impervious area calculated on properties within the City?** The impervious area of *non-single family residential* parcels was derived/calculated using aerial photography and/or field verification methods. Aerial photography was also used to establish that the median amount of impervious area of *single family residential* parcels in the City. The median amount of impervious area or residential equivalent unit (REU) for a residential property has been established to be 3,000 square feet.

**What is a Residential Equivalent Unit (REU)?** A Residential Equivalent Unit (REU) is equal to the median (or the approximate average) amount of impervious area associated with the impervious area footprint of a typical single-family residential property within Garden City. It has been established that the median single-family property contains approximately 3,000 square feet of impervious area.

**What is the City's SW Utility User Fee billing rate?** The City has set the stormwater user fee rate at \$4.75 per REU per month.

**How is the stormwater user fee charge calculated?** Most single family residential (SFR) properties will be charged 1.0 REU per month, except as stipulated in Section 30-284 of the SW Utility Rate Ordinance. All non-single family residential (NSFR) properties will be charged a custom amount based on the total impervious area on the property. For example, if a NSFR commercial site had 30,000 square feet of impervious surface, that

customer would be charged 10 REUs per month. The NSFR calculation is 10 REUs multiplied by \$4.75/REU/month which equals \$47.50/month for the customer account.

**How does the City define single family residential customers?** In general, single-family residential customers are a typical detached residential structure on a single lot. Please refer to the definitions section of the SW Utility Enterprise Fund Ordinance for a more detailed explanation.

**How does the City define non-residential customers?** Non-Single Family Residential (NSFR) properties are all other customers that do not fit into the single family residential class of customers. NSFR customers consist of two different types: (1) standalone NSFR customers where a single bill is generated for all impervious surface area on the property; and (2) apportioned NSFR customers where the impervious surface area is apportioned to each user on the property. Examples of apportioned NSFR customers can be found in many of the shopping centers in town where each business (tenant) is apportioned a part of the impervious surface area of the property.

**How are multi-family and/or manufactured home developments billed?** These customers are generally billed as NSFR customers. In most cases, the entire monthly user fee charge will be billed to the property owner/landlord. In some cases, the monthly user fee charge may be billed to the individual tenants by dividing up the total user fee charge among all the units.

**Will duplexes (and similar type properties) be charged the same as typical SFR customers?** No. The typical SFR customers will receive a flat rate, monthly stormwater user fee bill of \$4.75 based on a median impervious area (or REU) of approximately 3,000 square feet. Duplexes (or properties with two utility accounts) will be charged a flat rate of 0.5 REU per month, which equates to \$2.38. The theory is that the impervious area associated with a “duplex type property” is approximately 50% of a full REU of 3,000 square feet.

**What if my SFR property consists of only one small residential structure?** If the SFR structure and associated impervious areas are between 500 square feet and 1,500 square feet of then the customer is eligible for a *Reduced SFR Footprint Credit* per the SW Utility Credit Manual. A customer that secures this credit will be billed similar to the duplex example above in that the customer account will be charged 0.5 REU per month. This is consistent with the 1,500 square foot (or less) impervious area footprint for the property.

**Why are churches and other tax-exempt properties required to pay?** All properties within the City limits that have impervious areas in excess of 500 square feet will be charged a stormwater user fee regardless of ownership or property tax status. All impervious surfaces (e.g. parking lots and rooftops) contribute stormwater runoff, and therefore, all customers should share the implementation cost of the City’s SWMP.

**How many other Stormwater Utilities exist in Georgia?** As of January 2009, it was estimated that approximately 35 stormwater utilities currently exist within the State of Georgia and more than 600 currently exist across the country.

**Why did the City decide to implement a Stormwater User Fee Charge?** In order to address the SWMP needs of the City, the City determined that additional resources were needed in the program. The City Council evaluated the feasibility of SW Utility user fee as opposed to levying a property tax bill because the City believes that user fee approach is a more fair and equitable approach than taxation for SWMP services. The user fee is not based on the assessed “value” of a property, like a tax, rather it is based on each customers demand on the system and the services provided -- similar to water, sewer, and sanitation. An additional benefit of a SW Utility is that all stormwater user fee revenues **must** be spent on stormwater management and drainage related issues whereas tax revenues are not subject to such restrictions. Although the user fee is a new charge to residents and businesses for stormwater services, SWMP costs have always existed and were historically absorbed within the City General Fund budget.

**Is there any way to reduce the Stormwater User Fee Charge bill amount?** Both residential and non-residential customers may be able to apply for credits to reduce their stormwater user fee charge by following the procedures outlined in the City’s SW Utility Credit Manual which is available on the City website. The credits are based on specific structural and non-structural stormwater controls (or best management practices) that reduce the impact of a customer’s stormwater runoff on the City’s drainage system and/or assist the City in meeting its regulatory compliance requirements.

**How will the City bill me for SWMP services?** The stormwater user fee charge will be billed on your existing Garden City monthly public utility bill. If you do not currently receive a utility bill from Garden City, you will begin to receive stormwater user fee bill beginning in February 2009.

**What if I think that my Stormwater User Fee Charge bill has been calculated incorrectly?** The customer should contact the City Customer Service personnel and request a copy of the Stormwater User Fee Charge Inquiry/Review Fact Sheet and Application Form. These documents will provide the customer with the needed materials to request a formal user fee charge review.

**How do I report a stormwater problem (drainage, flooding, pollution, etc.)?** The customer should contact the City Customer Service personnel to report any drainage problems or polluted discharges to the City’s stormwater drainage system.

**Who do I call if I have additional questions?** Contact the SW Utility Manager (Thomas Griffin) with any further questions at 912-966-7777.