

Town of Chapel Hill

Stormwater Utility Public Education and Involvement

Introduction

The Town of Chapel Hill has established defined priorities for its Stormwater Management Program. Two of these priorities point directly to the need for a coordinated and highly targeted program of public education and involvement:

Develop a formal public education and involvement program targeting key stakeholders.

Stormwater education efforts will target key stakeholders, including institutions, development and business communities and the general public. Education efforts will focus on both causes and solutions for stormwater problems, including possible regulatory remedies. Establish a clear understanding that stormwater and surface water systems are a public resource to be protected and managed in the public interest. Involvement strategies may include, among others, stenciling, voluntary litter control programs and adopt-a-stream efforts, etc.

Establish an understanding of the stormwater system as a “utility”.

It is important that the community have a better understanding of the complexity and importance of the stormwater management system and the comprehensive services that the Town provides to them. Long-term financing with a stable, dedicated resource (as other utilities are funded) will provide the community with a level of service that will meet expectations now and into the future.

In addition, specific Federal and State regulations impacting water quality require the Town to address public education and involvement in its programs, recognizing the importance of empowering the public to participate in protecting waters of the State. As part of its NPDES Phase II permit compliance strategy, the Town has committed to attainment of specific measurable goals including those related to Public Education and Public Involvement. These goals are to be reached by carrying out defined Best Management Practices (BMPs). Each BMP defines a target audience within the community that should be reached through the Town's education and involvement efforts.

In order to develop a plan for the Public Education and Involvement program, we must first identify: (1) **the phases of the program**, (2) **the “public”** or the relevant target audience, (3) **the message(s)**, and (4) **the media**, i.e. different ways available to the Town to communicate the message to the public.

Phases of the Program

The development of a public understanding of the stormwater program and user-fee is expected to have three phases: buildup, billing day, and the post-billing period.

Buildup is the period of developing and implementing the stormwater management program and funding program. The buildup starts immediately and progresses to within a few weeks of the first bill going out. This period is one of gathering and disseminating data and information, identifying and meeting with certain key stakeholders, educating the press, and forming policy.

Billing Day starts about three weeks before the first bill is sent out and lasts through the first month of billing (seven weeks altogether). It focuses on broad coverage of the reasons for the fees, examples of the effectiveness of the stormwater program and customer service responses to those with inquiries and complaints.

Post Billing begins after the first month of billing and then blends into the long-term public education program concerning stormwater.

The "Public"

The meaning of the term "public" depends on the message being sent, the target audience for that message, and the phase of the program. Target audiences are selected to bring in influential segments of the community at the most opportune time. There are consistent messages for the entire Town (see "The Messages" below). In addition, certain portions of the "public" require special attention at crucial times.

Buildup - The "public" of interest in the earliest buildup phase of the program will include the University, the "Top 50" ratepayers, apartment building owners, the development community, and the churches, i.e. those most notably affected by the new policies. The press will also be a focus of attention during this period. The goal of the message during this phase of the program is to educate and build support, as well as neutralize opposition, among these various stakeholder groups. Therefore the message highlights, dramatically if possible, the current problems experienced by Town residents; it notes that all properties generate runoff; it stresses the benefits of the planned stormwater program; it introduces the concept of a fairer and more stable way to pay for the program, and it gives basic information on rates and credits. Part of the goal also is to educate ratepayers about the bill they will get in order to minimize the multitude of questions and concerns. It may give special attention to specific ratepayers to avoid pressures on the Council Members from special interest groups or powerful individuals. Attention should also be given to educating Town employees on the user-fee project and the strategies and goals of the organization to meet community needs in stormwater.

Billing Day- The "public" of interest at Billing Day is primarily homeowners and business owners. The message goal here is to educate ratepayers about the first bill they are receiving. The message must be communicated rapidly, often one-on-one, and consistently. There must be a phone line for the public staffed by people who can answer basic questions. There also must be technical personnel who can handle questions about credits, how the rate is applied and the bill amount. Another goal at this time is to demonstrate that the program is active and effective. One way to accomplish this is by having a construction begin on highly visible projects on the first day of billing.

Post Billing- The “public” will be all ratepayers, as well as the development community and the employees of the Town. The post billing period goal is to initiate a longer-term public education and response program. There should be consistent information on policies, a customer service attitude to the responses, and satisfying answers to most questions.

During this period, the messages will concern improvements in infrastructure, flooding, and water quality achieved as a result of the Stormwater Management Program. The general public and Town employees will also be given messages focused on their role in improving water quality through the Best Management Practices defined in the Town’s NPDES Phase II compliance strategy.

The Messages

What is it that makes a stormwater enterprise fund and user fee desirable in the first place? It provides a stable and adequate source of revenue to allow the Town to address stormwater management problems and it does so in a way that is fairer than property tax based methods.

The best way to “sell” a stormwater user fee is to stress the goals of the expanded stormwater program and to demonstrate those improvements in service in the first few weeks of the program’s life. Care should be taken not to try to sell the program “because EPA is making us do it”, “to get more money”, or “because the general fund will get a windfall”, etc. It is also important not to raise expectations above what can be delivered. More money is NOT the solution if the program itself is not more effective

So, in summary the messages should stress:

- there are needs in the community that are currently not being met (with specific examples that are readily identifiable);
- we have a plan to meet these needs that is well thought out, effective and not extravagant;
- government must take the lead in this;
- this plan costs some more money, but this additional investment is well worth it in terms of solving problems;
- the method to generate this new revenue is fair, adequate and stable, and is more equitable than a tax increase;
- the method is not a tax but a user fee and is very practical in its approach;
- the cost to each homeowner is minimal; and
- there are highly visible projects as a demonstration that the program is a reality.

Once we have decided on the timing of our message, the target audience for the message, and the content of the message, we can focus on the mechanisms or “media” for conveying the message effectively.

Buildup Phase

Internet Microsite- Perhaps the most useful and cost effective medium for conveying information about the Stormwater Program and funding strategy in Chapel Hill during the Buildup phase is the Town’s website, www.townofchapelhill.org. It is recommended that relevant information about stormwater and the Town’s funding strategy be gathered into a “microsite” within the current Town domain so that citizens could access all stormwater related material from a single stormwater homepage (i.e. townofchapelhill.org/stormwater) This site could contain a base of information to which all other forms of public notice about stormwater could refer. There are several pieces of information that could be placed on the microsite at this time.

1. An FAQ about stormwater and the concept of a stormwater utility.
2. The town's NPDES Phase II application and comprehensive Stormwater Management Program.
3. The Stormwater Impact Statement and Stormwater Management Plan Guidelines (already on the Town site under the Engineering Department)
4. Some explanation of the Town’s current efforts to create funding equity through user fees;
5. The Stormwater Microsite should include a mailto: address to a Town employee who could respond to citizen questions. These questions could also be added over time to the FAQ.

As additional information becomes available, it could be added to the site so that the Stormwater Microsite would always be the most accessible and up-to-date source of information on Stormwater in Chapel Hill.

The cost of operating the Stormwater Microsite would be negligible in terms of hardware and software, since the Town already has a high quality website in use. The development and maintenance effort would entail several weeks of programming time for creation of the site plus one day per month for updates and modifications.

Identity Creation - This involves the actions necessary to differentiate the stormwater service from other services. The actions taken in this regard depend on the Town’s decisions on how far they want to take this differentiation. It may involve letterhead, vehicle decals and uniforms, department status, etc. A decision on any symbols used to represent the Stormwater Program should be made early so that there will be time to establish the identity in public awareness before Billing Day. The cost of this process largely overlaps with exiting costs for letterhead, vehicle painting, etc. Some design costs might be incurred initially if a professional graphic artist is required.

News Articles - Some news organizations allow, and even appreciate, the Town providing newsy pieces about the program. They are not normally accounts of events but rather interesting stories about challenges in addressing flooded areas, the need for a new funding method, etc.

Testimonials – Testimonials (e.g. Mia Burrough’s project) work well in conjunction with presentations and within news articles. They are most effective when the audience can identify with the speaker in some way. A good testimonial involves someone who is perceived to be honest and appropriately emotional, who is articulate when giving the story clearly and cogently, and who can demonstrate the value of the program in fixing their particular flooding problem. The “articulate housewife” is the secret weapon when standing before a recalcitrant developer group, commission or other homeowner group.

Stakeholder Meetings - In these meetings it is important to demonstrate recognition of opinion leaders’ positions and influence, listen to their concerns, if possible solicit their support, and respond quickly to questions that cannot be answered on the spot. Such meetings should include representatives of the major ratepayers, churches, University, public sector, and press.

The cost associated with news articles, testimonials, and individual meetings could be substantial in terms of staff time, but this effort would be dispersed over a number of employees.

Billing Day

Informational Brochure(s) - These brochures are designed to give a simple explanation of the program, why it is necessary, and what it will accomplish. It should be developed to answer the most common questions asked by a large number of people yet kept non-technical. There may be several brochures that target different information (one general one, one to answer questions on billing, one on how to get a complaint fixed, maintenance policies and responsibilities, etc.)

In addition, a list of planned capital improvements along with a projected schedule for construction has proven to be very successful. Such a brochure would also be helpful for Chapel Hill given the focus of the program on the construction of numerous smaller capital and remedial maintenance projects. This brochure should be matched with a planned and prepared set of capital improvements which would be previously contracted and ready to break ground the day the first bills go out. These projects should be managed so that the media’s coverage of the program is about progress in fixing long-standing problems and not about a new fee or charge.

Brochures are currently scheduled for production in Year 2 of the Town’s NPDES Phase II Program. In addition, fact sheets for public distribution are planned in Year 3 for education regarding Illicit Discharge issues. It may be advisable to accelerate these BMPs in order to contribute to the education effort for the new user fees. The cost of producing and distributing quality brochures or flyers for the Utility would overlap with the Town’s Phase II efforts.

Bill Stuffer- If a bill stuffer is to be used, the first one will communicate the overall change in stormwater management, what programs are being initiated, and the priority of the effort. It will tell people that a bill will be sent in the future to pay for the program, and will provide a point of contact for additional information. The second bill stuffer’s purpose is to explain the residential rate structure, calling attention to specific planned projects and announcing that next month’s bill will include the stormwater management user fee. This technique will have to be carefully coordinated with OWASA, if they are the billing agent.

Customer Service - The mailing of a stormwater bill will generate some complaints and inquiries to the sender of the bill and to the Town. Having a well-conceived and responsive

customer service capability, which rapidly and effectively responds to these calls, is perhaps one of the best public relations options available. There will be a number of complaints that can be handled relatively easily by a trained customer service representative (even a temporary position for a few months of billing). But many of the calls will need to be handled by Town personnel either due to the complexity of the call or the importance of the caller

Slide Presentation – A video presentation based on slides with a recorded script is an effective tool to explain the role of a Utility in funding Stormwater improvements and the impact of the Utility on ratepayers. This is useful as an adjunct to meetings with stakeholders and the press as well as Town employees.

Post-billing

School Programs- A long term program for educating school children about Stormwater would be a cost effective way to build permanent community support for efforts to improve water quality. Such a program is also effective at reaching the families of the students. The costs will not be excessive but will require the cooperation of the Science Coordinator at each elementary school in the Town. Such a program is currently scheduled for Year 3 of the Town's NPDES Phase II program but could be accelerated.

In-house communication- The Town could use training programs for employees and the internal newsletter (The Communicator) to target messages about Stormwater. This is currently planned in Year 1 of the NPDES Phase II program. At least one such training session and/or employee newsletter should occur prior to sending the first bill.

Involvement

Stormwater Policy Review Committee - Chapel Hill has already instituted a Stormwater Policy Review Committee. Their meetings will generate additional public and media interest in the comprehensive stormwater management program. Information and handouts will be presented to the stakeholders and made available to the media. The press might interview individual stakeholders; special efforts to prepare them will help keep the message consistent.

As some of the most knowledgeable citizens on the issue of Stormwater, the Stormwater Policy Review Committee should be enlisted to help in the effort to explain the role of the Utility and to help convince the community that the Stormwater user-fee approach is the most stable and equitable funding source available.

Elected Officials- The elected political leadership constitutes a specific group of stakeholders – perhaps the most important group in terms of approval of the comprehensive stormwater management program. The Council Members must be treated with special attention during the development of the program and its policies.

The Press- The news media can be a great ally in Chapel Hill. When the media are educated and informed early, they are generally supportive of stormwater agencies and the utilization of user fees. The news media should be notified of important meetings and granted interviews when requested.

NC Big Sweep- The Town of Chapel Hill plans to participate in and promote the existing NC Big Sweep activities. This constitutes a Year 1 Public Involvement activity in the NPDES Phase II program.

Illicit discharges and connections- The Town plans to incorporate an illicit discharge detection public involvement program in its website beginning in Year 4 of the NPDES Phase II program. This will encourage residents to report observed discharges, illegal connections to the Stormwater system, and illegal dumping.

Deliverables

The Town will receive from AMEC Earth and Environmental the following products related to the Public Education and Involvement Program:

1. Assistance with formulating content for the Stormwater Microsite.
2. Examples of logos, symbols, and other mechanisms for creating a distinct identity for the Stormwater Program.
3. Review of articles or news stories prepared for submission to local newspapers to garner publicity for the Stormwater Program.
4. One slide/script presentation for use in stakeholder meetings and community presentations.
5. Camera-ready art for two bill stuffers for use at Billing Day (if appropriate).
6. One Stormwater brochure/flyer for use in general distribution.

Other elements of the introduction of the new program and fee structure, such as Customer Service assistance, is part of the utility implementation plan and is not considered in this proposal.

**SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES –
INTRODUCTION OF STORMWATER
MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

Activity/Quarter	2003				2004			
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	INTRO	<u>3</u>
Develop tools for public information program			■					
Construct Stormwater Microsite		■	■					
Develop brochures and flyers				■				
Develop contacts among stakeholder groups		■	■					
Develop list of speaking opportunities			■	■	■			
Meet with large ratepayers, institutions			■	■	■			
Develop slide presentation			■	■				
Seek media coverage			■	■	■	■	■	■
Public Informational meeting(s)				■	■	■	■	■
User-fee kick-off events							■	■
Customer Service Hotline							■	■
Continuation of public information activities							■	■

Stakeholder Checklist

Organization or Interest	Recommendation
Chamber of Commerce	
Merchants Association	
Major Industry	
Public Schools	
Schools of High Education	
Engineering Department	
Biology/Geology Department	
Environmental Programs	
Community Groups	
Garden Council Environmental Program	
Beautification Organization	
Parks and Recreation Supporters	
Churches	
Civic Groups	
4-H Leadership	
Service Clubs	
Neighborhood Associations	
Homeowners Associations	
Real Estate Organizations	
Apartment Management Association	
Realtors Association	
Development Community	
Home Builders Association	
Developers Association	
General Contractors	
Governments	
County	
Adjacent Communities	
State Agencies	
Federal Agencies	
Professional Associations	
Engineers Association	
Landscapers/Nursery Associations	
Environmental Groups	
Sierra Club	
Local Focus Clubs	
Agricultural Groups	

This list is generic in nature and should be used to identify key community interests that should be involved in the program development for stormwater.