

STORMWATER AUTHORITIES: TIPS FOR BUILDING SUPPORT

This article is a summary of recommendations provided by Water Words that Work, a company that helps non-profit organizations, government agencies and foundations develop modern and professional communication programs. The tips provided are taken from a 2014 presentation by Eric Ekl, Water Words that Work Principal.

Top Five Recommendations

If your local government believes a stormwater authority is right for you, here are our top five recommendations securing support of the community:

- 1. Call it a “Pollution Control and Flood Reduction Fee” or something similar. The name should emphasize the benefits rather than describe the problem.**
 - a. In our literature, we came across findings that residents are more likely to perceive a system with rates based on property stormwater volume -- with discounts for BMPs such as rain gardens, swales, etc. -- as a fee.
 - b. In contrast, residents are more likely to perceive a flat-fee model, with a fixed amount per property, as a “tax.”
 - c. Careful messaging can move a majority of opponents or “fence sitters” to support a new fee.
- 2. Clearly show ratepayers how the money will be invested. Most importantly, use “before and after” photos.**
 - a. “Before and after” photos moved ratepayers’ opinions more than any other argument.
- 3. Present the fee as a solution to local problems and providing local benefits, and not as a way to meet Chesapeake Bay or other regulatory requirements.**
- 4. Present the fee in its smallest increment: (e.g. dollars per household per month) rather than its overall target (e.g. \$3 million over 5 years).**
- 5. Affirm to ratepayers that the money will be used for its stated purposes -- and that the funds will not be “raided” for other priorities.**

Recommendation #1:

Call it a Pollution Control and Flood Reduction Fee

 **Literature Review: Fee vs. Tax**



If a program ties the fee to stormwater runoff volume, they are likely to perceive it as a "fee" rather than a tax.

 **Literature Review: Fee vs. Tax**



If a program offers credit for onsite stormwater reduction, residents are more likely to perceive it as a "fee" rather than a tax.

 **Recommendation #2:**
Clearly show ratepayers how the money will be invested.



The best argument for an authority -- before-and-after photos of the work that will be done!



Recommendation #3:

Present the fee as a solution to local problems and providing local benefits

Here are reasons to SUPPORT a new charge. Rank them from best (on top) to worst (on bottom).

1. **Clean Water.** Your fees will go to clean up water for drinking, recreation, and wildlife (Average Score 2.3)
2. **Fairness.** All properties pay for the pollution and flood control services they receive (Average Score 3.2)
3. **Flood Damage Reduction.** Your fees will be used to protect the community from floods(Average Score 3.2)
4. **Accountability.** Local governments must use the money for pollution and flood prevention (Average Score 3.4)
5. **Economic Development.** The investments create local jobs and improve the business climate (Average Score 4.4)
6. **It's the Law.** The community has a legal responsibility to clean up its waterways somehow (Average Score 5.4)
7. **Chesapeake Bay.** The investments help clean up the Chesapeake Bay downstream from us (Average Score 6)



Recommendation #4:

Present the fee in its smallest possible increment

From the literature review:

- “Talking about how many millions of dollars a program will cost can make it seem unmanageable. Psychological research concludes that by reframing larger monthly or yearly fee amounts, into smaller time frames, like weekly or daily expenses, people find them more manageable and reasonable.”
- “By putting the costs into small monthly and weekly costs per household, large million dollar projects begin to seem manageable. A \$3 million repair to a failing storm drain system isn't as daunting when put in terms of \$5 per household per month. Also, by spreading the costs over the community, you are reminding everyone that “we are all in this together.”



Recommendation #5:

Affirm to ratepayers that the money will be used for its stated purposes

Here are reasons to OPPOSE a new charge on your water bill. Rank them from best (on top) to worst (on bottom).

1. **Misuse.** Local government will misuse the money it collects (Average Score: 2.58)
2. **Cost.** A few dollars per household per month is too much to pay (Average Score: 3.31)
3. **Other Options.** Local government can find the money somewhere else (Average Score: 3.48)
4. **Slush fund.** Local government will raid the fund for other purpose (Average Score: 4.23)
5. **Permanent.** The fee will be in place forever (Average Score: 4.64)
6. **Not Fair.** Churches, nonprofit organizations, and the poor should not pay this charge (Average Score: 4.73)
7. **Other Priorities.** Local government has bigger problems than pollution and flood control (Average Score: 5.03)

In our survey, residents reported they were substantially more concerned about the prospect that the funds would be misused than the cost itself.

["Selling" Stormwater Management \(google.com\)](https://sites.google.com/a/waterwordsthatwork.com/selling-stormwater-management/) – outreach materials for your use

<https://sites.google.com/a/waterwordsthatwork.com/selling-stormwater-management/>

{Name} Stormwater Authority
Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Stormwater Authority and what will it do?

{Name} Stormwater Authority will be a local government agency that has three related jobs:



Guard the purity of the waterways that provide drinking water



Protect people, property, and roads from flooding.



Ensure waterways are clean enough to enjoy and for wildlife to survive.

What do water pollution and floods have in common?

All floods and most polluted waterways have one thing in common: stormwater runoff.



When rain falls or snow melts faster than it can soak into the ground, the runoff ends up in local waterways. When more runoff reaches these waterways than they can hold, they flood.

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Sample Outreach Materials

{Name} Stormwater Authority will achieve the following goal over the next five years:

- Replace and improve xx miles of storm sewer pipe
- Restore XX acres of eroded shoreline
- Plant XX trees.

How much will these investments cost me? How will you calculate my fair share?

The average fee works out to about \$1000 (amount) per household per month. It is low because all properties pay it. The small amounts add up. The total will be enough to make real investments that will make a difference.

Fees can be flat by category, or we can calculate each individual property's fee using a formula that accounts for the size of the property and the amount of hard surfaces—pavement, asphalt, roofs—that cause water runoff.

Why is this a fair way to calculate the fee?

This is fair because properties that create more stormwater runoff pay more, and properties that create less stormwater runoff pay less.

The FAQs have many sections designed for you to customize with local information.

Sample Outreach Materials








Download and use our "Before and After" illustrations however you wish.