

# Millis Stormwater Utility Fact Sheet

## **What is Stormwater?**

Stormwater is the runoff from rainfall and snowmelt. During even moderate storms, large volumes of water are directed to drainage infrastructure (such as catch basins, pipes and culverts), which must manage and convey that water to local surface water bodies.

## **How is Millis' Stormwater Regulated?**

Since 2003, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in conjunction with the MA Department of Environmental Protection (MADEP) has issued Millis a permit to discharge municipal stormwater. That permit regulates the operation and maintenance of the system and requires minimum controls to manage stormwater quality. The permit is scheduled to be renewed every five years, with planned incremental changes in permit terms to establish much stricter water quality protection requirements over time, which will be more expensive.

## **What is a Stormwater Utility?**

A Stormwater Utility is a fund derived from user fees charged to property owners based on the amount of hardened or impervious surface that generates stormwater runoff from developed properties. The utility can be designed to pay for some or all costs related to managing stormwater infrastructure, including regulatory compliance, operations and maintenance, new capital projects or rehabilitation/restoration of existing infrastructure, among others.

## **What is an Impervious Surface?**

An impervious surface is one that is hardened such that water is prevented from draining directly into the ground. Impervious surfaces include rooftops, driveways, parking lots and patios. A surface that has been manipulated to modify the infiltration characteristics of natural soils can influence drainage patterns on or abutting the developed parcel. For example, pea stone gravel driveways get compacted over time, and act much the same as a paved driveway with respect to runoff. As a matter of policy, such driveways are considered an impervious surface per the Town's by-law.

## **What Does the Millis Utility Cover?**

The Town of Millis chose to implement a stormwater utility that would cover the entire cost of administering drainage infrastructure in the community. Such a program would transfer cost of maintaining the system from the Town's General Fund, which is tax-based, to the utility, which is user-based.

## **How was the Utility Developed?**

In late 2016 the Town submitted an application for a Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection-funded grant to explore the feasibility of creating a stormwater utility. This was done in anticipation of rising costs of system maintenance and regulatory compliance. The grant was awarded in early 2017 and the feasibility report was completed by the Town's consultant team in June of 2017. The process included two stakeholder workshops and public presentation of the report findings. Based upon findings of the report, the Town decided to pursue implementation of the utility. In Fall 2017 a Stormwater Utility By-Law authorizing creation of the utility was passed at Town Meeting. Over the next several months the Town undertook a process to establish policies, determine program funding needs, and set rates. The process included multiple public presentations with interested groups such as the Council on Aging, interviews with and posting to local media, workshops with Town staff and development of written material provided directly to Town property owners. The first utility bill was mailed in November 2018.

## **Who Gets Billed, and When?**

All property owners with developed land (whether residential, commercial, institutional, or public) in Millis are billed. As a policy determination, the Town is billing once annually in the Fall (October/November timeframe). The bill is unrelated to property value, or water/sewer use.

## **How Much Will It Cost Annually?**

Rates were set initially at \$2.75/billing unit/month. Billing units are equivalent to 1,000 s.f. of impervious surface on a given parcel. On this basis, the Town estimated 51% of properties in Millis would be billed 3 billing units or fewer, paying \$99 or less annually. The majority of the remaining 49% of properties (approximately 85% of that balance) would be billed at 6 billing units or fewer. Rates will remain unchanged for at least three years.

## **How was the Utility Budget Established?**

The Town has never tracked costs exclusively related to stormwater in the past, nor have most communities. During the feasibility study and then in the course of implementation, the Town refined an estimate of funding need based on historical expenditures, recognized new infrastructure investment to address deferred maintenance costs, future regulatory compliance costs and system administration. In addition, as with sewer and water enterprise funds, the budget allows for development of a reserve fund to finance future capital projects.

### **What is Stormwater Infrastructure?**

Millis' stormwater infrastructure collects runoff from all over town through a network of almost **1,200 catch basins, more than 700 manholes, more than 20 miles of mapped drainage pipe, almost 150 open channel culverts, approximately 80 treatment structures and over 160 discharge outlets.** The system discharges directly into local waterways, which are themselves a critical part of the Town's stormwater system. Much of the runoff collected in these systems discharges to the Charles River and tributaries that are the focus of significant environmental concern and regulatory control.

### **How is Millis' Infrastructure Maintained?**

Millis must actively maintain its stormwater system through tasks such as: street sweeping, storm drain inlet cleaning, inspection and repair of pipes, manholes, and storm drain inlets, upgrading treatment facilities, issuing permits for stormwater discharges on private property, inspecting detention ponds and many other activities. This activity protects water quality of receiving water bodies, and reduces the risk of flooding in public rights-of-way and private properties.

### **How Can I Reduce My Bill?**

Since bills are based on the amount of impervious area on your parcel (in increments of 1,000 s.f.), the easiest way to reduce a bill is to reduce that type of surface on your property. For instance, if you no longer use an old shed, or patio, remove those from your property and the bill would be reduced accordingly. In addition, a system of credits is in development that will provide up to a 20% bill reduction on the basis of pollutants captured and treated on your property; an additional 20% decrease could be achieved based on reduction in volume of stormwater discharged from your property. Since everyone in Millis benefits from the public health and safety benefits provided by the stormwater infrastructure, credits cannot reduce your bill to \$0. The credit system will be in place and applicable to bills starting in Year 2 of the utility. A full Credit Manual explaining the credit application process and basis for fee reduction will be publicly available through the Town's website in the near future.

### **What if the Bill is Wrong?**

If a property owner believes the calculated area of impervious surface is incorrect, that is the basis for an immediate appeal. The appeal process requires the property owner to pay the bill in total by the due date. The appeal should be filed within 30 days of receiving the bill. If determined that the appeal is valid (i.e. the calculation of impervious area on the parcel is determined to be incorrect) the property owner will be reimbursed for the difference in the correctly calculated fee.

### **Have Utilities Been Implemented in Other Places?**

Stormwater utilities are common across the country, with **more than 1,600 in operation.** They are less common in New England, but over a dozen communities have implemented utilities in the region including: Braintree, Chelmsford, Chicopee, Fall River, Gloucester, Longmeadow, Milton, Newton, Northampton, Reading, and Westfield, MA; Burlington, South Burlington, and Williston, VT; and Augusta, Bangor, Lewiston, and Portland, ME. This number has grown quickly in recent years and includes several communities currently conducting feasibility studies.

### **For More Information**

Questions can be directed to the Director of Public Works, James McKay, at 508-376-5424 or [jmckay@millis.net](mailto:jmckay@millis.net). More information may also be found on the town's website at [www.millis.org](http://www.millis.org).