

*Our natural resources are what makes Gwinnett County unique. These efforts will help protect them for future generations.*



DEPARTMENT OF WATER RESOURCES  
**STORMWATER UTILITY FAQS**

# STORMWATER UTILITY FEES

Gwinnett County adopted a Stormwater Utility in November 2005 to improve the level of stormwater services for activities such as repairing drainage problems, fulfilling regulatory requirements, and reducing pollution carried by stormwater to our waterways.

## 1. What is stormwater and why should we care?

Like sanitary sewer services, the county operates and maintains a system of pipes and channels that drain stormwater from our roads and protect our homes and businesses from flooding. This system is costly to maintain and is facing increasing regulatory requirements from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Stormwater starts out as rain. As rain falls to earth in agricultural or undeveloped areas, it is either absorbed into the ground or it slowly runs off and dissipates. rooftops and paved areas not only prevent the water from being absorbed, it increases stormwater runoff quantity and causes it to run off at a much faster rate. As a result, stormwater can accumulate, causing nuisance flooding and possible threats to public health and safety. Our current infrastructure system includes pipes that need to be upgraded in size to carry increased flows and pipes that need repair and replacement due to age and condition.

As stormwater flows over our streets, it carries pollutants such as gasoline, oil, and heavy metals. Pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers are washed from lawns and other green spaces. Over time, these pollutants build up in our waterways damaging our streams, rivers, and lakes. In addition to fixing drainage problems, we can help improve stormwater quality through stormwater management practices.

## Our stormwater program focuses on:

- Fulfilling EPA and State requirements
- Replacing old pipe systems
- Reducing pollution carried off by rainwater
- Educating and involving the public on stormwater
- Implementing standards to manage stormwater impacts from development
- Fund stormwater activities in a fair and equitable way

## 2. What is a stormwater utility user fee?

A user fee is a mechanism for the county to cover costs for services it must provide to meet public demands and stormwater regulations. The stormwater user fee is structured to cover costs fairly and equitably based on the amount of impervious surface on a property. The impervious surface area is directly related to the quantity of stormwater runoff generated.

## 3. Are we the only community with a stormwater user fee?

No. Stormwater user fees are being used in many cities in the United States and several in Georgia. Nearby communities that have a stormwater user fee include DeKalb and Rockdale Counties, most cities in Gwinnett County, such as Lawrenceville, Duluth, Norcross, Peachtree Corners, Sugar Hill, and Snellville.

## 4. Why do we need a stormwater user fee?

Unlike water and sewer services, prior to the adoption of the stormwater utility, there was no dedicated funding for the stormwater system and Gwinnett County used general funds from taxes to maintain the system. However, with the County facing increasing costs for stormwater management, it was decided that a more fair and equitable way to fund the stormwater program needed to be explored. A stormwater user fee provides revenue to maintain and improve existing stormwater infrastructure in Gwinnett County. In addition, this fund is used to implement the comprehensive stormwater management program required by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

## 5. What is the basis for the user fee?

The stormwater utility user fee is based on the amount of impervious surface area on each property to estimate stormwater runoff generated.

## 6. What is impervious surface?

Impervious surfaces are hardened surface areas that either prevent or limit the natural entry of water into the soil. rooftops, buildings, streets, parking lots, sidewalks, asphalt, concrete, other paving, driveways, decks, patios, and artificial turf are all examples of impervious surfaces. These impervious surfaces reduce natural infiltration into the soil, which increases runoff.

## 7. Are gravel driveways/roads being charged?

No, gravel surfaces do not contribute to the area used to determine the user fee. If a gravel area has been included in the impervious area identified on a parcel, please contact the customer service staff at [SWService@GwinnettCounty.com](mailto:SWService@GwinnettCounty.com).

## 8. How are fees determined?

The County follows the national model of measuring impervious surface area on individual properties. The user fee is determined based on the total square footage of impervious area. The 2021 rate is \$2.46 per 100 square feet units. The rate for subsequent years will be reevaluated in the future. The stormwater fee is charged as a line item on the annual property tax bill.

## 9. How is impervious surface measured?

In order to determine how much impervious surface is on a property, the County uses digitized aerial photographs to measure the total square footage of the impervious surface on a property. The aerial photographs are provided each year around February when the leaves are off the trees. The aerial photography that was used to calculate the 2021 bill was taken in February 2020. Anything that was built at that time will be billed. If a property was under construction during February 2020, only the area that was captured by the photography will be billed. For example, if only the foundation of the house was finished at that time it would have been captured, but if the driveway was not finished, it will not be billed until the following year.

## 10: Who has to pay?

Everyone. All developed properties within the Gwinnett County service area are billed a stormwater user fee. These properties include houses, businesses, industries, schools, public facilities, and churches. The County made a special effort to ensure fairness and equity. This has led to a policy that everybody pays, even government buildings. Everyone contributes to and benefits from the stormwater system, which is separate from the sanitary sewer system.

## 11. Why are churches and schools being billed?

Because this is a user fee and not a tax, the user fee, just like electric, drinking water, and sanitary sewer fees, is based upon the cost of services provided. The fee is collected from all customers who receive service. Churches and schools, like other properties, contribute runoff to the County. Due to the size and amount of parking lots and roofs on these properties, the runoff from these properties may be significant. There are no exceptions for churches and schools to ensure that cost of service is not unfairly shifted to other property owners.

## 12. What will the collected fee be used for?

Major components of the stormwater management program include:

- Repair and replacement of culverts, dams, curbs inlets, head walls and conveyance systems
- Meeting requirements of the County's stormwater permit
- Improving maintenance and repair of stormwater system
- Developing stormwater design standards and regulations and enforcement of the standards
- Construction of flood protection and water quality management projects.

## 13. Why should I have to pay? I live on a hill and don't have a drainage problem.

You may not have a problem, but the runoff generated from your property may contribute to problems downstream. The approach of this program recognizes that everyone contributes to the runoff and pollution and everyone shares the benefits of a well managed system, such as improved water quality and reduced flooding, etc.



**For more information, contact the Stormwater Utility Staff at:**

678.376.7193

[SWService@gwinnettcounty.com](mailto:SWService@gwinnettcounty.com)

# *A stormwater utility user fee allows Gwinnett County to meet the stormwater needs of the community in a fair and equitable way.*

## **14. Is there a way for me to reduce my bill?**

Since the stormwater bills are based on the amount of impervious surface area, the primary way to reduce your fee would be to reduce the amount of these surfaces. Additionally, Gwinnett County has developed a Credits Program that allows customers to reduce their stormwater bills in exchange for contributions made that offset the costs of the stormwater management program. For non-residential customers, examples of credits could include providing natural buffers along stream corridors, maintaining and operating detention or retention basins, and other similar items. Details of the credits program are available within the credits manual. A copy is available online at [GwinnettStormwater.com](http://GwinnettStormwater.com).

## **15. I live on a farm on a huge lot and the water never runs off my site? How can you justify billing me?**

The Gwinnett County Stormwater Credits Manual has a "Low Impact Parcel" credit that might apply to this situation and reduce your bill. However, the Utility is responsible for cleaning and repairing the entire storm drainage system in the roads that residents drive on every day and for protecting and improving the water quality, habitat, and biology of our streams. While flows may be diminished from properties with small impervious surfaces compared to the total property, in large storms everyone contributes flow to the streams so everyone with impervious surfaces will pay some fee. While runoff from the property may not flow into a street, it does flow into a stream and that stream flows through culverts under roads in the County that the utility must maintain. The utility is

responsible for protecting the health of the streams which is part of the quality of life that all residents of Gwinnett County get to enjoy. The utility also maintains the drainage system in roads that all residents travel on everyday which also contributes to the economic wellbeing and quality of life in Gwinnett. A stormwater service fee based on impervious surfaces has been found to be the most fair and equitable method of distributing the costs of maintaining and operating stormwater systems.



## **16. It hasn't rained in a while. Do I still have to pay the stormwater fee?**

The storm drainage infrastructure including pipes, catch basins, etc. must be maintained no matter how much flow is running through it at any given moment. This infrastructure must be maintained so that the next storm does not result in flooding and damage. In addition, the fee supports ongoing costs associated with investigation of illegal dumping into

storm drains during dry weather and towards the repair of streams and waterways damaged by previous storms.

## **17. Why don't residents in the cities have to pay?**

All cities in Gwinnett County, except Lilburn, have their own stormwater programs which are currently funded by those cities. Since the County does not maintain any stormwater structures inside these cities, the County does not charge the residents a service fee. The city of Lilburn has joined Gwinnett County's Stormwater Utility and as of 2007, property owners in Lilburn will be billed and receive similar services to those provided to residents located in unincorporated Gwinnett. If you are a resident of a city in Gwinnett County, you may pay the stormwater user fee established by the city (except the city of Lilburn).

# BILLING INFORMATION FAQ

## **18. As an individual property owner, how do I find out how much I am going to pay?**

You are able to preview your bill on the Gwinnett County web site using the GIS Data Browser. Instructions can be found in the document titled "Find Stormwater Billing Information on the Web" on the Utility web page. You can also email us at [SWService@gwinnettcounty.com](mailto:SWService@gwinnettcounty.com) or call us at 678-376-7193. If no impervious area shows up on your property, it is likely that you are inside a municipal boundary and will not pay a stormwater fee to the County. Please turn on the City Limits layer to determine whether the property is a city or the county.

## **19. If I disagree with the amount being charged, what can I do?**

We will work hard to address your questions as quickly as we can. An appeal process has been set up and instructions can be found in the document titled, "Appeals Procedure" on the Stormwater Utility web page. You can

email us at [SWService@gwinnettcounty.com](mailto:SWService@gwinnettcounty.com) or call us at 678.376.7193. If you would like to see the area that was used to determine the charge, the customer service group can mail you an 8 1/2 x11 map of the property.

## **20. When will I receive my bill and when is it due?**

The stormwater fee will appear as a service fee line item on your property tax bill along with other service fees that may apply such as streetlights. Property tax bills are typically mailed in August with the first installment due in mid-October. Please check with the Tax Commissioner's Office for exact dates.

## **21. What if I was overcharged?**

The amount will be credited on the next year's bill. A refund check is given if the amount of the refund is greater than the bill after all refunds/credits have been applied. Refund checks will be sent after the bill has been paid in full. If paid by check, there will be a waiting period to verify that the check clears. Refund checks will be sent out quarterly.

## **22. What if I choose not to pay the stormwater fee?**

All unpaid stormwater fees shall be collected from the property owner, regardless of whom the bill was originally directed to, by using collection methods allowed under Georgia law. Failure to receive a bill is not justification for nonpayment. Delinquent stormwater service fees will incur a 1 percent per month late penalty assessed against the owner of the unpaid balance.

## **23. I am renting an apartment or house. Do I have to pay this charge?**

Stormwater utility bills are sent to the property owner. It will be up to the property owner to decide how to handle it.

## **24. Do the elderly or disabled get a break?**

Since this is a user fee and not a tax, everyone has to pay. All developed properties within Gwinnett County will pay the stormwater user fee. These properties include houses, businesses, industries, schools, public facilities, and churches. The County made a special effort to ensure fairness and equity. This has led to a policy that everybody pays, even churches and other tax exempt entities.

## **25. What if my property tax bill is paid by my mortgage company through an escrow account, will my mortgage payment go up?**

The mortgage company will pay the tax bill as usual. You will need to contact them to find out if, when or how they will adjust your escrow payments.

## **26. I live in a condo/townhome community. How was my bill determined?**

The impervious area for the community was totaled and divided by the number of units so everyone will be billed the same amount. This was determined as the fairest way to divide all of the common areas.

## **27. I live in a subdivision that has a community center/pool/private streets. Will my HOA dues increase?**

The bills for common areas will be sent to the owner of the property. If the parcel is in the HOA's name, the HOA will receive the bill. The HOA decides how to cover the cost.



# CREDIT INFORMATION FAQ

*NOTE: As of January 2021, Gwinnett County Stormwater Credits Manual was updated to incorporate new building, regulations, and changes to industry practices.*

**28. How long will credits be valid?**

Most credits are valid for 1 to 5 years and can be renewed. Details on available credits, terms, application process, and renewals can be found in the Gwinnett County Stormwater Credits Manual.

**29. When will credits be effective?**

As long as customers submit the proper documentation by December 31, credits will continue to be in force as long as the property and the action which justified the credit remain the same for the term of the credit.

**30. Who will evaluate the credits?**

The Gwinnett County Department of Water Resources' Stormwater Best Management Practices (BMP) Credits team at DWRBMPCredits@gwinnettcounty.com will be responsible for evaluating credit applications.

**31. Will there be a fee associated with filing for credits?**

No.

**32. Why are some practices only given partial credit?**

The Gwinnett County Department of Water Resources has evaluated the effectiveness of the various methods that are considered when allowing partial credits. Rather than taking an "all or nothing" approach, the Department will approve partial credits for those practices that are less effective than others, but still provide a benefit to the community.

**33. How will the adoption of the new credits manual affect my current credits?**

Changes to the new manual will go into effect for the 2022 billing cycle and thereafter. Some credits are being discontinued and a property owner may be ineligible for credits they used to receive under the previous manual. Gwinnett County will work with property owners to discuss the applicability of credits for your property.

**34. Will I need to reapply for credits, if I currently have existing credits?**

Existing credits will continue to be applied until expiration

**35. If I am receiving credits now, will I need to re-apply when the credits term expires?**

Yes, to continue to receive credits or qualify for additional credits, the property owner must submit a new credits application.

**36. Why are residential WQ and cistern credits being discontinued?**

Gwinnett County adopted new stormwater design standards in December 2020 and practices must meet these standards to qualify for future credits. There are potential water quality credits available for ponds and cisterns, but the owner must document that they are sized to the criteria in the latest Gwinnett County Stormwater Management Manual.

**37. Why do customers have to apply for credits with an actual applications form? Why doesn't DWR just automatically apply the eligible for a specific credit?**

There are many options for credits from physical Stormwater Best Management Practices (BMP) to 17 different watershed stewardship practices. Given the variety, and combinations, of potential credits that can be applied, it is up to the owners to determine the best possible credit combinations for their parcel

**38. Why is DWR no longer auto-extending credits as provided in the past?**

With the adoption of the new Stormwater Utility Credits manual in December 2020, several of the credit requirements changed. Given those changes, it is necessary for all credit holders to make themselves familiar with the new requirements and select appropriate credits for their property. There are no lifetime credits.

**For more information, contact  
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