

# STORM WATER STEWARDSHIP

Water and sewer authority course fosters citizen knowledge, participation and advocacy

By Terry M. Cole & Barbara Williams

Communities across the country are facing the challenge of implementing fees to pay for necessary repairs to the aging storm water system, as well as maintaining and installing new structures. Despite dramatic evidence during rainstorms that the storm water system is failing—flooding, washed-out roads, property damage—citizens sometimes have a difficult time understanding and accepting what has been dubbed the “rain tax” in many communities.

One effort that proved successful for a utility in Georgia was designed not only to educate local residents about the need for a storm water fee, but actually to turn citizens into storm water stewards who advocate the need for storm water management. The program was designed targeting storm water credits for churches and businesses.

By encouraging church members and employees to attend a three-hour course on storm water management, the local water and sewer authority (WSA) allowed attendees to earn a monthly dollar amount credit that could be applied to the storm water bill of the church or business of their choice. Thus, the course was a strategically designed indoctrination of citizens.

## Methodology

In 1985, a rapidly growing community in the metropolitan region of Atlanta

formed an authority tasked with the operation and delivery of the water and sewer system serving customers throughout the city and parts of the county. For almost 20 years, the WSA served this role while contending with the increasing challenges of storm water impacts to area water resources, particularly as related to the Clean Water Act. To address these challenges, the WSA approached the city and county about contracting to assume management of storm water throughout the local area. An initial agreement was reached with the city, and eventually with the county.

To fully understand the magnitude of the situation and to develop a clear strategy for addressing storm water challenges, the WSA conducted studies and analysis to determine the issues within the existing storm water infrastructure. Initial estimates to repair the infrastructure came in at between \$200 million and \$400 million. The question of how to fund these significant improvements was answered with the decision to form a storm water utility, with storm water fees applied to property owners based on a carefully considered fee structure.

Public information about the approach was distributed throughout the city, and community meetings were held to provide information about the new funding mechanism. When residents across the city received their

initial billings, feedback was light, with no significant resistance heard from impacted property owners.

However, when the WSA took the next step and sent the billings to property owners who were county customers, a cry arose from area churches. They complained that the fee was unfair and unduly burdensome to their budgets. Citizens called county commissioners, and the WSA faced growing concerns.

To address the challenge while maintaining the basic platform of the utility fee collection, the WSA established a credit program for local houses of worship and businesses. Credits were offered at different levels based on what was done by the property owner to reduce storm water on site (e.g., implementing a maintenance/pollution prevention plan or maintaining a detention, retention or water quality structure). To add value to the credit program beyond direct impacts to controlling storm water with physical structures or plans, the WSA conceived the idea of conducting classes. Attendees could earn credit for the church or business of their choice.

## Storm Water 101

The WSA decided to have a third party conduct the classes to preserve the structure and format of the dialogue and to diminish the opportunity for



The WSA showed customers how storm water fees improve the community. For example, storm water infrastructure before (far left) and after (left).

individual property owners' issues of concern to dominate a discussion. Classes were advertised through the local newspaper, messages on water bills and water bill inserts. The method that resulted in the greatest impact was "pulpit pitches," in which pastors and church members encouraged attendance.

Sign-ups were required to manage class size, and churches could reserve spots for members. The class registration form included a section for attendees to designate the church to which their credit should apply. This designation had to be made prior to attending the class, and it was required in order to receive the credit. A credit package was provided to a representative from each group as well. It offered information on the other ways to earn storm water credits.

The presentation for each class followed a format that included background on why storm water issues are a growing concern in the local community. Presentations examined costs associated with managing storm

water, examples of storm water impacts to the local environment and discussion of the federal regulations associated with storm water and its impacts. Specific case studies of storm water damage to property and other facilities across the community were presented, as well as insights into the need for a storm water utility and fee to fund storm water infrastructure repairs and maintenance.

### Lessons Learned & Results

Participation in the classes was stronger than expected. Lessons learned for future consideration included possibly scheduling classes during the day to accommodate older residents who were uncomfortable driving after dark. The initial classes also included a test at the end simply to engage participants, but it was received negatively and subsequently dropped from the course.

The WSA's public outreach program was successful, with hundreds of area residents participating. The authority continues to field calls from residents reporting storm water violations (e.g.,

someone cleaning a paintbrush in a local stream or a contractor with no silt fence installed). Perhaps the truest testament remains the fact that of the nearly 2,000 non-customer invoices routinely mailed out, almost 70% of them are paid.

**Authors' note:** The authors wish to acknowledge the leadership of Douglasville-Douglas County WSA Executive Director Pete Frost, who generated the idea for the storm water stewardship classes. [SWS]

**Terry M. Cole is communications practice director for Jacobs Eng. Group Inc. Cole can be reached at [terry.cole@jacobs.com](mailto:terry.cole@jacobs.com). Barbara Williams is communications coordinator for Douglasville-Douglas County Water and Sewer Authority. Williams can be reached at [bwilliams@ddcwsa.com](mailto:bwilliams@ddcwsa.com).**

**For more information, write in 803 on this issue's Reader Service Card or visit [www.estormwater.com/lm.cfm/st061103](http://www.estormwater.com/lm.cfm/st061103).**

**Storm Capture™**  
**Detention • Retention • Recharge • Reuse**

Patent Pending

- **Easy Install/Easy Maintenance**
- **Traffic Loading Design - HS20**
- **Minimum Footprint/ Maximum Storage**

**Oldcastle Precast®**

[www.oldcastleprecast.com/stormcapture](http://www.oldcastleprecast.com/stormcapture) 888-965-3227