

Funding Fundamentals

A Washington state storm and surface water utility celebrating its 35th anniversary offers lessons learned in the arena of funding

By Rebecca Wilhelm

As storm water programs continue to be developed, it becomes increasingly clear that storm water quantity and quality management comprise only one part of an integrated water management

system that encompasses wide-ranging responsibilities, including urban flood control, regulatory compliance, water and resource management and environmental protection. Within such a complex system, the issue of funding—fundamental to operation and success—can present major challenges.

Bellevue, Wash., a city of about 120,000 people, pioneered one of the nation's first storm water utilities. The city formed its storm and surface water utility in 1974. "Denver beat us by about a month for being the first in the nation," said Denny Vidmar, utilities director for the city of Bellevue.

Taking note of the trials and successes Bellevue's utility has experienced over the years provides a model long-term perspective for utilities facing their own unique challenges.

Sparked by Citizen Concern

In 1965, the Revised Code of Washington was changed to allow establishment of utilities for storm water control. "Citizens began voicing their concern about the degradation of the city's

streams, wetlands and open spaces," Vidmar said. "The city council and community leaders began to recognize the need for a comprehensive approach to storm drainage control."

Next, the city council authorized a study examining Bellevue's streams and how to preserve them. Guidelines followed for land development adjacent to streams and for surface drainage into streams. A stream preservation policy was established, and an ordinance was passed regulating clearing and grading. In addition, a bond issue was passed that included funding for a new storm drainage study.

In March 1974, following a public hearing, the Bellevue City Council adopted an ordinance to establish the utility and a system for surface water management, according to Vidmar.

Bellevue selected an "open-stream concept," using streams as the main conveyance system to control flooding and preserve waterways. In-stream flood control facilities are used to attenuate peak flows for older development.

Benefits of the open-stream concept have been realized: It is less costly than traditional storm sewer improvements and is more sensitive to the environment and stream ecosystem, Vidmar said.

"Citizens seem to appreciate that in addition to flood prevention and upgrades to infrastructure, funding is spent on preserving streams and wetlands and protecting water quality," Vidmar



At some locations, the city of Bellevue constructs fish ladders where there are barriers to salmon migration.

said. "The city's comprehensive plan and municipal codes are written to reflect the philosophy that development should be in balance with the environment."

Sustained by Citizen Consent

Because every locality has unique considerations, a cookie-cutter approach is not viable. Whatever the components and funding structure of a specific storm water utility program, getting the public on board and keeping people in the decision-making loop is key to its successful implementation.

Although citizen concern was one of the factors driving the formation of Bellevue's utility, a lack of citizen education was one of its biggest hurdles.

"Initially, there was not enough education and public involvement," Vidmar said. "Citizens didn't understand why they were paying for drainage. Also, because it took longer than anticipated to map all properties and estimate runoff coefficient and parcel sizes, there was a lag time between when a mailing occurred about the new billing and when customers received their first bill. People were upset at first."

But gradually, "through continued education and public involvement, along with the establishment of a Storm & Surface Water Advisory Commission, consensus grew for the utility and its funding mechanism," Vidmar said.

"I think it's important to involve citizens and community leaders in the planning stage so they understand why funding is important and how it will be used," Vidmar said. He suggests making the most of public meetings, newspaper articles and direct-mail campaigns, noting that these outreach efforts should precede the first utility bill so that underlying messages are fresh in mind.

"Make sure you provide not only public education about why a storm and surface water utility is important, but involve citizens in the process," Vidmar said. "Don't assume that you are reaching everyone with a mailing."

Elizabeth Treadway, vice president and U.S. Water Resources program director, Earth and Environmental, AMEC, agrees.

Reliable ways of gaining public acceptance and support include, in the words of Treadway, "Education, education and more education." She also suggests "a citizen-based steering committee to guide policy and process of a user-fee evaluation and implementation."

As a general resource, Treadway also suggests the U.S. EPA-funded "Guidance for Municipal Stormwater Funding," developed through the

National Association of Floodplain and Stormwater Management Agencies and available at www.nafsma.org. The document offers an explanation of critical issues and key policy elements.

While finding creative ways to inform the public is crucial, Bellevue takes the concept a step further and involves the public in development of its program.

"The Environmental Services Commission is made up of Bellevue



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citizen volunteers who oversee rates, budgets and programs,” Vidmar said. “Meetings are open to the public, and citizens are encouraged to get involved.”

The city also conducts a yearly survey to ask customers about their satisfaction with the storm and surface water utility’s services and whether they feel they are getting a good value.

As Bellevue’s storm and surface water utility marks its 35th year of service, it is seeing much of its infrastructure in need of repair or replacement. While increasing rates at a time of economic hardship is certainly challenging, the utility has proven its value in the community and hopes that through the relationship it has developed with its customers, residents will continue to decide that flood protection and stream preservation are efforts worth funding. **SWS**

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