

Stormwater Utility FAQs

The County is considering changing how the stormwater program is funded. The stormwater program is currently funded by a Sanitary District Tax, which is based on a property's assessed value. A Stormwater Utility is an alternative way to pay for the County's Stormwater Management Program, based on the amount of hard surfaces (impervious area) on a property. Like a water or sewer utility, a Stormwater Utility is a fee for service for managing stormwater.

Background

How is the stormwater program currently funded? Arlington's stormwater program is currently funded through a Sanitary District Tax, which is based on a property's assessed value. The current stormwater fee is 1.7 cents per \$100 of assessed value. An average property pays about \$130 per year under the sanitary district tax. However, a property's assessed value doesn't correlate well to the amount of runoff a property generates.

Why is the County considering changing to a Stormwater Utility? A stormwater utility would provide a new way to pay for the County's stormwater management program, based on the amount of hard surfaces (impervious area (IA)) on a property. A property's impervious area is a better measure of how much stormwater runoff each property generates. A stormwater utility is a fairer way to pay for stormwater based on the estimated usage of the system, as opposed to the property assessment.

What are impervious areas? Impervious areas are hard surfaces that significantly prevent water from seeping into the soil. Impervious surfaces include: roofs, buildings, streets, parking areas, driveways, and any concrete, asphalt, or compacted gravel surface.

What if all the runoff from my home and driveway stays in my yard and does not run off into the storm system? Providing for and addressing stormwater is a public service provided by Arlington County. Even if you do not believe your property contributes much or at all to the stormwater infrastructure, all property owners benefit from a properly maintained and operated stormwater management system that serves the entire County. Some key benefits include reduced flooding; reduced property damage; protection of critical infrastructure (such as electrical, communications, drinking water, wastewater); safe transportation for residents; improved quality of life; cleaner streams; restored water habitat; and compliance with Federal and State regulations for water quality improvements.

Stormwater is an issue that extends far beyond your residence or business and a robust stormwater management program provides benefits to the overall community in which you live, work, and play.

What if there is a drought and there is less rainfall? Do the fees go down? The stormwater utility helps to fund the County's stormwater management program and infrastructure, which are ongoing needs even in times with less rain.

How Does a Stormwater Utility Work?

Can you explain how a stormwater utility fee works? Under a stormwater utility, a property's impervious coverage would be estimated using the County's digital mapping system (GIS). The median impervious coverage for single-family detached properties in Arlington has been estimated at 2,400 square feet. This is called an Equivalent Residential Unit (ERU) and is used as the billing unit. A fee for one ERU will be established for the utility and properties would be charged based on how many ERUs are on the property. An ERU is currently estimated to be \$230-250/year. Please note that the fee estimates may change as the budget and stormwater utility are finalized.

How does the County propose to bill the Stormwater Utility? The City proposes to put the SWU fee on property owners' real estate tax bill as a separate line item. Real estate taxes are due in June and December of each year.

Why are we using ERUs rather than simply charging a fee based on square feet of impervious area? There are limitations to accuracy of the mapping data and the square foot measurement would be too fine-grained of a measurement for estimating fees. It would also require more administrative burden as compared with using a rate structure based on ERUs.

Stormwater Utility Customers

What's the cost impact to homeowners? For an average homeowner, the current sanitary district tax is around \$130 per year. Under a stormwater utility, 90% of single-family homeowners will be charged 1 ERU or less. 1 ERU is currently estimated at \$230-250 per year (please note these numbers may change as the rate structure and future budgets are finalized).

Proposed Rate Structure for Stormwater Utility

Customer Class	Impervious Area (IA) in Square Feet (SF)	Billing Unit
Single Family Attached (townhouse or duplex)	--	0.6 ERU
Single Family Residential	≤1600 SF	0.6 ERU
	>1600 - ≤3600 SF	1.0 ERU
	>3600 - ≤4800 SF	1.7 ERU
	>4800 SF	Per ERU
Multi-Family	--	0.18 per Dwelling Unit
Non-Residential	--	Per ERU

I noticed that high rise commercial properties will pay less; why would that be? Under the current sanitary district tax, properties with a high assessed value pay a higher stormwater fee. However, there is no correlation between property values and use of the stormwater system. Commercial properties that have a high property value, and also have multiple stories (a more efficient use of the impervious footprint) will pay less under the stormwater utility than under a sanitary district tax.

How will this stormwater utility be assessed on condos? For a multi-family property, the impervious area fee would be distributed among all the units.

How will this change affect nonprofits and churches? Some organizations, such as churches and non-profits, have been exempt from paying stormwater fees under the sanitary district tax. They would no longer be exempt with a stormwater utility. The fee for these organizations would depend on the size of their property and amount of impervious area, or number of ERUs on their property. An ERU is currently estimated to be \$230-250/year. Please note that the fee estimates may change as the utility is finalized.

Does this cost apply to the County itself? Will County properties be included in the GIS survey and publicly accessible? The fees do not apply to every organization. A small number of property types are exempted by Virginia law, such as public rights-of-way, government-owned properties, and properties covered by their own MS4 permit. With a stormwater utility, most properties, including untaxed properties, will be charged fee, which ensures that all properties that contribute to stormwater impacts are paying their fair share towards the stormwater program.

Rate Structure

If a single-family residential detached property has less than 2400 sq ft, will it still be charged 1 ERU? The proposed rate structure for single family properties has several tiers, with the initial tier of 0.6 ERU for properties with less than 1600 feet of impervious area.

Can the utility be used to "reward" or incentivize private property owners to plant trees or take action to reduce runoff from the property? A credit program is required for any jurisdiction that creates a stormwater utility in Virginia. The credit program will be a way to say "thank you" for doing certain environmentally friendly activities, such as installing a permeable driveways, rain gardens, planting trees, native plantings, etc. Arlington's credit program is still being developed. Stormwater utility credits are usually a relatively modest reduction for individual properties (typically credit programs comprise under 1% of utility fee revenues).

Do we expect the revenue to stay the same, or increase to help with upgrading the aging stormwater system? We do anticipate that over the next 10 years we will be considering rate increases for substantial needs to improve the stormwater system. For the initial analysis, we had to choose one budget year and a specific amount for making the estimates.

Does this go to a public vote at some point or how is it decided? This will go before the County Board for a vote early in 2023.

Are there any other municipalities that charge a Stormwater Utility Fee? Yes, stormwater fee-based programs are promoted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and authorized by the Commonwealth of Virginia as a way of addressing shortfalls in water resources. Stormwater fee-based programs have been used since 1974, and there are currently over 1,500 stormwater fee-based programs in the country and 28 in Virginia. In the surrounding area, D.C., Prince George's County, the Cities of Alexandria, Falls Church, Manassas, Fairfax, and Manassas Park all have stormwater utility fees in place.