

'A very costly program': Property owners face new fees to combat stormwater pollution

A NEW STORMWATER FEE WILL RUN THE CITY OF LEBANON'S RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY OWNERS \$60 PER YEAR, FOR EXAMPLE, AND LARGE BUSINESSES WILL PAY MUCH MORE.

***Daniel Walmer** ([/staff/10045532/daniel-walmer](#)), Lebanon Daily News*

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 satisfy regulators.

For people dedicated to a clean Chesapeake Bay, the phrase "crap flows downhill" isn't a metaphor.

That's why environmental regulators have required Pennsylvania to prevent local stream pollution that effects the bay dozens of miles away, cracking down on sediment and pollution runoff from farms in rural areas and manmade impervious surfaces in towns.

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Clean water

Following years of pressure from the federal government and other states in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, the DEP recently bolstered its efforts to help create a clean bay. In rural areas, it applied pressure directly to farmers whose practices cause pollutants to enter streams.

The DEP also required municipalities with “urbanized areas” – including most Lebanon County towns – to reduce the sediment that enters their waterways by 10 percent during their next 5-year stormwater system permit cycle. They must also decrease nitrogen levels by 5 percent and phosphorus levels by 3 percent.

If they don’t comply, the DEP will issue fines – something Lebanon learned the hard way in 2010 when it was one of four central Pennsylvania towns hit with a combined \$128,608 in fines for not meeting stormwater requirements.

Requirements can be met through projects like stormbank restorations, improvements to water detention basins, planting trees and creating rain gardens, and traditional cleanliness measures like street sweeping.

The projects should also help restore the health of local streams, said Bryan Hoffman, a member of the Cleona Borough Authority and executive director of the Lebanon County Housing Authority. He has helped several towns comply with the requirements.

“Do you want your children and grandchildren to be able to fish in the Quitty, or do you want a dead creek?” Hoffman asked. “Not to preserve what we have would be unconscionable.”

The projects should be a big help for the Quittapahilla Creek and its tributaries, according to Michael Schroeder, president of the Quittapahilla Watershed Association, which performed stream bank restoration about 20 years ago in portions of the watershed. Those areas now have clean water and you can see the pebbles on the bottom of the creek bed, while other tributaries have become 40-foot-wide muddy quagmires, he said.

In addition to looking better, fully restored stream banks would likely improve the region’s population of fish and other aquatic wildlife, he said.

“It’s the entire food chain that relies on the viability and health of the streams,” he said.

More: [From dream home to health hazard: Problems have been nonstop for one Cornwall family \(https://www.ldnews.com/story/news/local/2018/06/11/new-dream-home-turns-nightmare-cornwall-family/439594002/\)](https://www.ldnews.com/story/news/local/2018/06/11/new-dream-home-turns-nightmare-cornwall-family/439594002/)



Fencing and plants along the right side of the Quittapahilla Creek protect it from pollution and runoff.

(Photo: Submitted)

Paying for progress

Still, those improvements come at a cost – one each town must pay unless it is rural or small enough to be exempt or receive a waiver from the DEP.

At least 12 Lebanon County municipalities received a waiver or are exempt: Jonestown, Mount Gretna and Richland boroughs and Bethel, Cold Spring, East Hanover, Millcreek, North Annville, Swatara, Union, West Cornwall and West Lebanon townships.

On the other hand, more densely populated towns that already have higher local tax rates are among those that were hit the hardest. Six of these - Annville, Cleona, Lebanon and North Lebanon, North Cornwall, and South Lebanon townships – formed the Lebanon

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County Stormwater Consortium to plan \$1 million per year of improvements. The six municipalities will pay for the combined projects based on each town's miles of impaired streams, population and acres of impervious surfaces.

Recently enacted, annual stormwater fees levied against property owners will pay the bills.

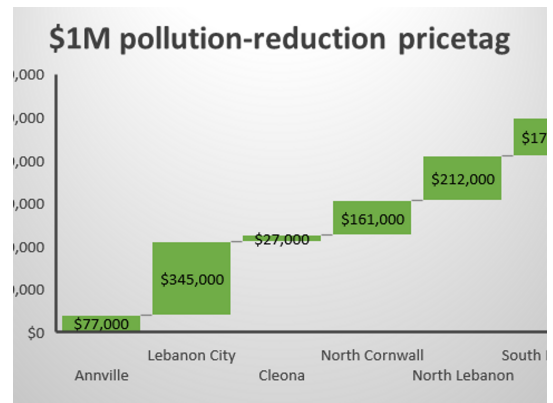
Residential property owners in Lebanon and North Cornwall Township will pay \$60 per year, while those in North Lebanon Township will have to pay \$40 per year, and those in South Lebanon Township will pay \$26 per year. Some residential property owners in Annville will pay \$10 per quarter, or \$40 per year. Annville residential properties in the R-1 zoning district will pay a slightly higher rate because they have a higher average impervious surface per parcel.

The Cleona Borough Authority has imposed a \$100 per year fee on its property owners, but Hoffman said some of that money will also be used for generally needed stormwater system improvements.

Businesses will have to pay a sliding rate based on their amount of impervious surface as compared to an average single-family home.

Other towns decided to meet the requirements on their own, either because they had a relatively small burden or were geographically isolated from the members of the consortium.

Many of these are not imposing a stormwater fee, opting instead to absorb the cost from their general fund. Cornwall budgeted \$20,000 this year to help meet the requirements, according to borough manager Steve Danz. South Annville and North Londonderry townships have only minimal requirements that can easily be met through the general fund, officials said.



Six Lebanon County municipalities have agreed to spend a combined \$1 million per year over the next 5 years to reduce pollution from stormwater runoff. Each town's fee is based on its population, amount of impervious surface, and amount of impaired streams.

(Photo: Daniel Walmer, Lebanon Daily News)

“We want even more of your money”

Even with \$1 million per year in hand, the projects proposed by the Lebanon County Stormwater Consortium may not be enough to satisfy the DEP.

That's because of a dispute over the amount of sediment for which municipalities are considered responsible.

“MS4s are required to include all of the sediment generated from within the federally-mapped ‘urbanized area,’ which can include open space,” said DEP press secretary Neil Shader in an email.

The towns in the Consortium – as well as some running into the same controversy in Berks and Lancaster counties – believed it was “common sense” that they didn't have to count stormwater runoff that never reaches waterways because it is absorbed in farms or other open areas, Hoffman said. They sent a letter to the DEP complaining that the agency “changed the rules in the middle of the game,” he said.

If the DEP's interpretation is correct, the municipalities will have to undertake additional projects, at an additional cost to taxpayers who have already been asked to accept a stormwater fee, he said.

“To go back to those same citizens now and say, hey, guess what, we want even more of your money because the government had decided to go beyond what they said they wanted – I said to DEP, that's going to be a pretty heavy lift,” he said.

Property owners face new fees to combat stormwater pollution Daniel Cannistraci, the Multiple Separate Stormwater Systems (MS4) coordinator for Steckbeck Engineering and Surveying Inc., said the DEP hasn't given a timeline for approving the Consortium's plan. In the meantime, the pollution-reduction projects are at a standstill except those funded by other grants that have a time constraint on their completion.

This article has been changed to correctly explain Annville's stormwater fee and the total amount of money raised by the Lebanon County Stormwater Consortium.

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