



Town of Chapel Hill

Pro Forma Business Plan –

Utility-Based Stormwater Management Program

I-5 Public Involvement Plan

Introduction

The Town of Chapel Hill has had three separate Advisory Committees over the course of the past 10 years to review and develop recommendations regarding stormwater management. In each case, public information and education was recommended. For example, the *Recommendations of the Stormwater Utility Development and Implementation Study Committee* November 26, 2001 urges the Town “to undertake a comprehensive and coordinated public education program to consistently inform citizens of stormwater, water quality and floodplain management issues, to enable them to take mitigation actions and to provide a simple mechanism to alert officials of observed problems”. Based on a public charette, previous committee recommendations and review of the Comprehensive Plan and other relevant policy documents, the same committee listed “effectively educating and incorporating citizens, businesses and institutions in stormwater management issues and programs” as a goal for comprehensive stormwater management.

Regulations impacting water quality require the Town to address public education and involvement in their programs, recognizing the importance of empowering the public to participate in protecting waters of the State.

Public awareness and education are carried out in stormwater management programs in two ways: specific public education campaigns and ongoing "baseline" public information programs and activities. These differ in that a campaign has a beginning and an end while the ongoing program goes through transformations but does not envision an ending.

In order to develop a plan for the public information and education (PI&E) program we must first identify: (1) the phases of the project, (2) the “public”, (3) the message(s), and (4) the different possible ways to communicate the message to the public (the media).

Phases of the Project

The development of a user-fee for stormwater is expected, in terms of public information, to have three phases: buildup, billing day, and the post-billing period.

The buildup is the period of developing and implementing the stormwater management program and funding program. The buildup starts immediately and progresses to within a few weeks of the first bill going out. This period is one of gathering and disseminating data and information, identifying and meeting with different key public sectors, educating the press, and forming policy.

Billing day starts about three weeks out before the first bill goes out and lasts through the first month of billing. It focuses on broad coverage of the reasons for the billing, examples of the effectiveness of the stormwater program and customer service responses to those with inquiries and complaints.

The post billing period begins after the first month of billing and then blends into the long term PI&E program about the stormwater program.

The Messages

What is it that makes a stormwater enterprise fund and user fee desirable in the first place? It provides a stable and adequate source of revenue to allow the Town to fix and avoid flooding (and other stormwater) problems and it does so in a way that is fairer than property tax based methods.

The best way to “sell” a stormwater user fee is to stress the goals of the expanded stormwater program...and to demonstrate those service changes in the first few weeks of the program’s life. Care should be taken not to try to sell the program “because EPA is making us do it”, “to get more money”, or “because the general fund will get a windfall”, etc. It is also important not to raise expectations above what can be delivered. More money is NOT the solution if the program itself is not more effective. And, if there will be no property tax rebate; the Town needs to have a good explanation why in case the question is asked.

So, in summary the messages should stress:

- there are needs in the community that are currently not being met;
- we have a plan to meet these needs that is well thought out, effective and not extravagant;
- government must take the lead in this;
- this plan costs some more money, but this additional investment is well worth it in terms of benefits;
- the method to generate this new revenue is fair, adequate and stable, and is fairer than a tax increase;
- the method is not a tax but a user fee and is very practical in its approach;
- the cost to each homeowner is minimal; and
- you will see results.

Specific program-related messages concerning stormwater credits, a potential cost savings for detention with new master plans and models, a more effective maintenance program, etc. can also be effective.

Message Goals

In terms of the phases of the project the messages should reflect what is happening or about to happen as:

- **Buildup** - The goal of the message during this phase of the project is to educate and build support among the various stakeholder groups. Therefore the message highlights, dramatically if possible, the current problems experienced by Town residents; that all properties generate runoff; it stresses the benefits of the planned stormwater program; it introduces the concept of a fairer and more stable way to pay for the program, and it gives basic information on rates and credits. Part of the goal also is to educate ratepayers about the bill they will get in order to minimize the multitude of questions and concerns. It may give special attention to specific ratepayers to avoid pressures on the Council Members from special interest groups or powerful individuals.
- **Billing Day** - The message goal here is to educate ratepayers about the bill they just received. The message must be communicated rapidly, often one-on-one, and consistently. There must be a phone line for the public staffed by people who can answer basic questions. There also must be technical personnel who can handle questions about credits and the bill amount. Another goal at this time, to help blunt any criticism, is to demonstrate that the program is active and effective. One way to accomplish this is by having construction begin on projects the day of first billing... and in advertising that fact.
- **Post Billing Period** - The post billing period goal is to initiate a longer term public education and response program. Some policies will be made "on the fly" as a more effective capital program begins and people become more aware of the stormwater services. There should be consistent information on policies, a customer service attitude to the responses, and satisfying answers to most questions. At this point a consistent way of making policies is as important as the policies themselves.

Menu of Activities

Examples of some of the more common public awareness tactics are described below. During development of the Public Involvement and Education plan those items selected by the Town will be refined.

- **Identity Creation** - This involves the actions necessary to differentiate the stormwater service from other services. The actual actions taken in this regard depend on the Town's decisions on how far they want to take this differentiation. It may involve letterhead, vehicle decals and uniforms, department status, etc.
- **Informational Brochure(s)** - These brochures are designed to give a simple explanation of the program, why it is necessary, and what it will accomplish. It should be developed to answer the most common questions asked by a large number of people yet kept non-technical. There may be several brochures that target different information (one general one, one to answer questions on billing, one on how to get a complaint fixed, maintenance policies and responsibilities, etc.)

- **Fact Sheet** - This can be a more technical but still abbreviated way to communicate information on specific topics (e.g. how to calculate your bill, what brought about the fee, what will the money be spent on, etc.). They are useful as leave behind information for certain groups (e.g. how will credits be calculated, impact on landlords, etc.).
- **White Papers** - A White paper is an in-depth discussion of topics of interest to the newspapers. They are designed to provide information that gives all necessary background for an article (or series of articles) that a paper may write. It can then serve as a reference document for the newspaper to check facts and get additional filler information to back up, for example, reporting on a public meeting.
- **News Articles** - This may be part of the white paper or another press packet. Some news organizations allow, and even appreciate, the Town providing newsy pieces about the program. They are not normally accounts of events but rather interesting stories about flooding, the funding method, etc.
- **Informational Meetings** - These meetings are designed to convey the information found in one or more fact sheets to a select or targeted group. The informational meeting is not as formal as a presentation, and allows for more give and take. This type of meeting can be effective if the speaker can give convincing reasons for the program and demonstrate that the audience concerns have been fully considered. They can be less than effective if the speaker cannot give good answers to questions and cannot demonstrate understanding of and empathy for the audience concerns.
- **Testimonials** - Testimonials work well in conjunction with presentations and within news articles and white papers. They are most effective when the audience can identify with the speaker in some way. A good testimonial involves someone who is perceived to be honest and appropriately emotional, who is articulate when giving the story clearly and cogently, and who can demonstrate the value of the program in fixing their particular flooding problem. The “articulate housewife” is the secret weapon when standing before a recalcitrant developer group, commission or other homeowner group.
- **Individual Meetings** - There are some individuals often called opinion leaders who, when convinced, have significant authority and influence over others. And when unconvinced they can hinder progress. In individual meetings it is important to demonstrate a recognition of opinion leaders’ positions and influence, listen very carefully to their concerns, if possible solicit their support, and respond quickly to questions that cannot be answered on the spot.
- **Video** - Many cities, namely Greensboro and Charlotte in North Carolina, have produced some excellent videos that run for about 5-10 minutes. They have used them as public information spots on local access cable channels, and for showing at public gatherings and civic association meetings. The first video talks about the need for the program, how the program can be solved, what is constraining the Town from making progress, how the program is the solution. The second video would focus on the creation of the enterprise fund, how the rate was determined, and answer some of the more common questions regarding the user fee.
- **Bill Stuffer** - The first bill stuffer is to communicate the overall change in the stormwater management, what programs are being initiated, and the priority of the effort. It will tell people that a bill will be sent in the future to pay for the program, and will provide a point of

contact for additional information. The second bill stuffer's purpose is to explain the residential rate structure, calling attention to specific planned projects and announcing that next month's bill will include the stormwater management user fee.

- **Customer Service** - The mailing of a stormwater bill will generate a lot of complaints and inquiries to the sender of the bill and to the Town. Having a well-conceived and responsive customer service capability, which rapidly and effectively responds to these calls, is perhaps one of the best public relations options available. There will be a number of complaints that can be handled relatively easily by a trained customer service representative (even a temporary position for a few months of billing). But many of the calls will need to be handled by Town personnel either due to the complexity of the call or the importance of the caller.
- **Project Booklets** - A list of planned capital improvements along with a projected schedule for construction has proven to be very successful. Such a booklet would also be helpful for Chapel Hill given the focus of the program on the construction of numerous smaller capital and remedial maintenance projects. But the booklet should be matched with a planned and prepared set of capital improvements which would be previously contracted and ready to construct the day the first bills go out. These projects should become media events so that media's coverage of the program is about progress in fixing long-standing problems and not about a new "rain tax".

Involvement

Chapel Hill has already used stakeholder groups, sometimes referred to as the Stormwater Advisory Committee and the Technical Advisory Committee, very effectively to develop an "appetite" for improvements in stormwater programs. Advisory groups can also be used in the next phase of the project to help in communicating the message(s) about importance of various program issues. We recommend instituting a Stormwater Policy Review Committee (see also I-4 Recommended Approach). Their meetings will generate additional public and media interest in the comprehensive stormwater management program. Information and handouts will be presented to the stakeholders and made available to the media. The press might interview individual stakeholders; special efforts to prepare them have helped keep the message consistent. We anticipate that the stakeholder group will have representatives from the general public, residents, business and industry leaders, environmental awareness groups, and other community special interest groups, in addition to the Town staff and political leadership.

As policy decisions are made, the Stormwater Policy Review Committee will need to be informed and involved with the associated implementation programs. As residents of the Town, their ability to be informed and knowledgeable will enhance their neighbor's respect for the Town. Town Staff should offer strong coordination with the group so they are knowledgeable about the implications of the policies, data collection and developments in the program.

The elected political leadership constitutes a specific group of stakeholders – perhaps the most important group in terms of approval of the comprehensive stormwater management program. The Council Members must be treated with special attention during the development of the program and its policies.

Plans should be made to educate the general public and to create opportunities for them to get involved in the stormwater management program. They represent a diverse group, which will require several methods to reach. There is an old and true adage in the public awareness business: "bring me in early I'm your partner; bring me in late, I'm your judge." It often takes longer on the front end to do this, but it helps ensure success in the end.

The news media can be a great ally in Chapel Hill. When the media are educated and informed early, they are generally supportive of stormwater agencies and the utilization of user fees. The news media should be notified of important meetings and granted interviews when requested. White papers and other information are also helpful to insure they understand the concept and can portray it properly.

Other Public Information Needs

Whether or not Chapel Hill determines it will proceed with a utility implementation, the Town will be required to provide some baseline public information and education as well as public involvement and participation as part of the NPDES Phase II water quality regulations. The requirement for a standing long-term public involvement approach to water quantity and quality issues will continue for the foreseeable future. This could best be accomplished through an interjurisdictional stormwater work group which- could develop a program to share costs and at the same time reach a larger audience.

Implementation

It must be remembered that the public information program is to support and follow the stormwater management program, not lead and shape it. The program drives the public information campaign not vice versa. There is often a tendency for the Public Information and Education program to take on a life of its own, losing sight of the 'real world' objectives of the stormwater management program.

Once a decision has been reached on whether to proceed with the utility, a detailed public information plan needs to be developed. Elements in that plan would include: definition of public interest groups, identification of specific stakeholders, matching the correct communication medium with the groups, planned schedule of public information events and activities, and specific activities to be undertaken.

Current efforts like stenciling drains and providing information on the Town website should be considered for appropriateness and as elements of the program. A minimal public information program to introduce the stormwater utility will cost between \$50,000-\$75,000 (development of some combination of appropriate brochure, video, slide presentation and/or flyers or envelop stuffers). In addition, a baseline public information program will be needed for the foreseeable future to meet regulatory guidelines for NPDES and other water resources issues. Spending for this purpose is estimated at \$.50 to \$1.50 per year per capita, which would put the Town's spending at \$25,000 to \$75,000 per year.