

Think-tank touts stormwater fees to increase transparency

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A report by an environmental think-tank based at the University of Ottawa calls on cities to adopt separate fees so property owners know exactly how much they're paying for stormwater infrastructure.

The report by Sustainable Prosperity, which will be released Monday to coincide with the Livable Cities Forum in Halifax, says basing a stormwater fee on property value or water consumption isn't fair, since they have no relation to how much stormwater is caused by the property. The best method is to charge each property for the amount of stormwater services it uses, the report says.

Sara-Jane O'Neill, the researcher and author of the report, said more Canadian municipalities are considering how to implement fees to pay for stormwater services.

"A stormwater fee is one way to put your stormwater on a more financially sustainable system," O'Neill said. "It's one of the ways municipalities are transitioning to something that is more fair and transparent."

The City of Ottawa is changing the way it charges for stormwater services. It has been hugely controversial for those property owners who currently don't receive a municipal water bill.

The infrastructure built to handle rainfall and snow melt, such as storm sewers and ditches, is paid from revenue generated through the city's water and sewer rate budget. That means about 45,000 property owners who don't receive water bills haven't been paying for stormwater management, but according to the city, they have been benefitting from ditches and sewer systems.

The city came up with options to implement a stormwater charge, either based on property value assessments, property types or simply through a one-size-fits-all fee, but an outcry from residents sent staff back to the drawing board last spring. The city has been clear that those property owners who haven't been contributing to stormwater services will pay for them under a new contribution scheme, which is expected to come to council this fall.

O'Neill said the fairest way to charge for stormwater is by assessing each property for its impervious surface.

“That is the most accurate because you’re actually being charged on the amount of stormwater your site generates,” O’Neill said.

The city has considered a property-specific fee but is worried about the cost of assessing each property.

O’Neill pointed to Victoria, B.C., as one city that’s doing a good job implementing a stormwater fee. Victoria has assessed each property for impervious surfaces and is also offering incentives for property owners who add their own stormwater mitigation measures, such as rain barrels or permeable paving. Victoria’s stormwater fee begins this fall.

The trick is turning people’s minds to stormwater mitigation, which isn’t the most scintillating topic.

O’Neill said staff in municipalities report one positive development when they start the conversation on stormwater fees.

“The best part was it was a really good education opportunity,” she said.