

## Message from the Mayor: The Pochassic Street Bridge and Stormwater

Well it's hard to believe that we just closed the book on the year that was 2010. And now we're into our new year and with that I continue my mission to keep you, the citizens of Westfield informed about the happenings of your city government. There are two very different topics I would like to share with you this month.

Up first, finally, it's here, the start of the Pochassic Street Bridge Project. These types of MA DOT capital improvement projects start their public phase with a notice of public hearing. So here's a sneak peak...on January 27, 2011, at 7PM in City Council Chambers, MA DOT representatives will be conducting a public hearing on the proposed 5 million dollar project. As I have mentioned in a previous message to you, this project, through the intense and persistent lobbying efforts of this office, of State Senator Mike Knapik, and State Representative Donald Humason, we were able to convince the Governor to expedite this project and to fund it when there were no identified funds in place. Well, with some good fortune and a convincing argument late last fall, MA DOT agreed to bid this project in the spring of 2011 with a late fall 2011 construction start date. One full year ahead of schedule. So make sure you show up in force on the 27<sup>th</sup> to hear about the details of the project and let them know your concerns.

Now on to a very hot topic, that of storm water management utility billing. Many of you have recently received two consecutive bills for this new utility charge. The reason for this is a bit complex but the easiest way to explain it is in that our billing computer software system was not able to simply add the new charge mid year to the quarterly utility bill you normally get that covers solid waste management, sewer and water charges. Because of that, we needed to send out two bills to cover the first two quarters of the annual bill.

For billing purposes we break the city up into three quadrants. There is one more left to bill. We received a number of complaints relative to wasting money by sending two bills. That's a point well taken. So for the second round of billing we worked with a small group of students from our business technology program at the Voc-Tech to hand stuff over 3500 envelopes that had two bills and a brief explanation as to where to go to get further information about the new utility charge. In the end, by doing it by hand with volunteers we will save a few thousand dollars. And in times like this, saving every little bit helps. All future billings will now occur on your quarterly statement.

So you might be asking for what reason has this happened to you. I will try to give you the Reader's Digest version of why we have a new stormwater utility charge. Since the passage of the Clean Water Act in the early 1970's by the Congress, the US Environmental Protection Agency has been charged with the task of developing regulations that when fully implemented will result in clean water discharges to our rivers and streams and ultimately into the oceans. In the early days, some of us native Westfield citizens may remember the Westfield River turning colors because of industrial discharges that are no longer allowed. The early efforts of the clean water regulations were focused on industrial discharges and wastewater plant construction. And as the years rolled on and these initial very severe sources of pollution were slowly controlled and in some instance eliminated other sources of pollution were identified.

Another category of water pollution included stormwater discharges. The focus again early on was on industrial sources and large construction projects. Now in the latest effort, cities and towns are now required to ensure that they, to the extent feasible, reduce pollution from runoff from within their respective boundaries. What is stormwater runoff? Stormwater runoff is precipitation from rain or snow melt that flows over impervious surfaces and enters a storm sewer system and is discharged into the water bodies that we use for swimming, fishing and providing drinking water. Any surface that does not allow water to penetrate or pass through it is considered impervious. The roofs on homes and buildings as well as sidewalks, driveways and parking lots are all impervious surfaces. Rainwater and snow melt do not penetrate these surfaces, therefore they allow "stormwater runoff".

Westfield is required under its National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Stormwater Permit (for more information on the EPA NPDES program go to: [http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/home.cfm?program\\_id=6](http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/home.cfm?program_id=6)) to provide enhanced management of stormwater runoff quality to mitigate the impacts of pollutants which may be discharged from the public municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) and stormwater conveyance system into State of Massachusetts' or United States waters. Compliance with the regulatory obligations of the NPDES permit, along with other City stormwater program activities, will substantially increase the cost of providing stormwater management services above what is currently being spent for water quality management, drainage system maintenance, flood control and other program activities.

In early 2010, the City Council enacted the Stormwater Utility Ordinance. This ordinance had been under study for at least a year and maybe longer before it was finally passed. The ordinance establishes two rates; a residential rate of \$20.00 annually or \$5.00 per quarter and a nonresidential rate of \$.045 per square foot of impervious surface; \$100.00 minimum annually, with a \$640.00 maximum charge. Any mixed commercial/residential property or housing over three units will be charged as nonresidential.

Section 18-157 of the city stormwater utility ordinance establishes the utility in the department of public works. Day to day supervision of field activities is under the direction of the deputy superintendent.

Section 18-158 states the purpose for the new ordinance. The end purpose is to ensure that stormwater runoff is properly managed and eliminates to the extent possible pollution from stormwater from running into our streams and rivers.

Section 18-159 establishes the city's authority to establish this utility. The city is allowed to adopt local ordinances through the powers granted to cities and towns by the state charter and subsequent Massachusetts General Laws or MGLs.

The specific purposes of the stormwater utility fund called out in the city ordinance include the following:

- (a) The acquisition of property in order to operate and maintain a stormwater management system;
- (b) The costs associated with the implementation of the comprehensive stormwater management program including capital reserves that could be used in emergency situations;
- (c) The costs associated with engineering and design, debt service and financing expenses for construction;
- (d) The costs associated with maintenance of systems, including catch basins, ditches, swales and street sweeping;
- (e) The costs associated with illicit discharge detection and elimination;
- (f) The costs associated with monitoring, surveillance, and inspection of stormwater control devices;
- (g) The costs associated with water quality monitoring (we are required to sample stormwater runoff and analyze the samples for contaminants on approximately 300 outfalls to surface water, twice over the next few years);
- (h) The costs associated with retrofitting developed areas for pollution control;
- (i) The costs associated with inspection and enforcement activities;
- (j) The costs associated with billing and administrative actions;
- (k) Other unforeseen activities related to stormwater management.

There are provisions for fee exemptions, credits, abatements and appeals hearings. All of these provisions are clearly spelled out in the ordinance. You can view the ordinance at [www.cityofwestfield.org](http://www.cityofwestfield.org). One last question I get relative to billing is why do the citizens need to send the payment to "Chelsea." The short answer is because it is incredibly cost effective to do this. To return the utility billing system to the city by hiring billing staff would cost us well over \$150,000 per year in salaries, health insurance, and other benefits like severance and retirement not including the additional expenses for postage, printing, paper and envelopes. As always if you have any questions call or email me at 413.572.6201 or [mayor@cityofwestfield.org](mailto:mayor@cityofwestfield.org).

Respectfully,

Dan Knapik