

Water Resources Management Case Study

Stormwater Management Utility

City of Griffin

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Description of Effort

In July 1998, the City of Griffin became the first municipality in Georgia to establish a stormwater utility. The utility addresses stormwater quality and quantity issues and generates funding to implement comprehensive watershed management programs. In creating the stormwater utility, Griffin engaged in a research and program development process to determine the administrative structure, activities, and funding methods that best fit the needs of the city and the desires of the stakeholders.

Griffin is located approximately 45 minutes south of Atlanta in Spalding County and has a population of about 24,000. Like many areas in Georgia, stormwater management was a growing concern for the city due to:

- a deteriorating drainage system;
- growing neighborhood flooding;
- areas with no drainage;
- unplanned channels created by street runoff; and
- limited funding to address these issues.

In addition, Griffin was facing suspected, but unknown, water quality problems and upcoming regulatory requirements. The city found its water quality issues were complicated by critical remedial maintenance and capital construction needs. It also needed to begin the process of planning and situating itself to be ready for the

anticipated federal National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase II stormwater quality regulations.

Like many communities, Griffin wrestled with the challenge of funding programs to resolve these problems without adversely impacting other municipal services. The city decided to establish a stormwater utility with an associated department that consolidates responsibilities, generates funding, and manages a comprehensive, consistent program.

Managerial Considerations

The director of public works, along with the Griffin City Commission and Mayor, took the lead in exploring administrative arrangements that could resolve the city's stormwater management concerns. The city attorney and city manager played a considerable role in shaping the institutional structure, which required the city to pass two ordinances, one to establish the utility and the other to establish the rate structure. Members of this municipal team visited stormwater utilities in North Carolina, Florida, and South Carolina and attended conferences in the process of researching and organizing the utility.

In addition, the City of Griffin hired a consulting firm that provided a planning process to determine the city's stormwater program needs and general program direction. This process also provided a way to solicit political and public support prior to full program commitment. Political and citizen stakeholders were involved through meetings at civic clubs, professional organizations, and in the school system as well as through public hearings, while educational information was released via the newspapers, radio, and television shows.

Information systems and personnel were added to support the development and function of the stormwater utility. A geographic information

construction of stormwater projects. Initiating the utility opened the door for other sources of funding based on the ability to match funds and on the community's reputation for commitment to stormwater management. Public works, therefore, has secured significant grants and loans to accomplish critical projects including:

- a \$725,000 Georgia Emergency Management Agency hazardous mitigation grant to remediate severe flooding problems;
- up to \$158,000 in Georgia Environmental Protection Division Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management grants to install a bio-retention pond to improve water quality;
- \$2.6 million in State Revolving Fund loans at 3.75 percent interest with 2 percent closing costs for five stormwater projects and one piece of equipment, the jet-vac truck;
- a planned stormwater utility-backed revenue bond in 2001; and
- application for a \$1.1 million TEA-21 (Transportation Efficiency Act) grant for retrofitting highway structures contributing to stormwater runoff of pollutants.

Outcomes

Several actions appear to have been critical to the successful development of Griffin's stormwater utility.

The political backing of key elected officials was solicited early in the process. Their support was based on a comfort level with the utility's focus on flooding problems, the planning and education approach, and the expected benefits to the community.

A consultant with a proven track record in a wide variety of settings with similar projects was retained. The consultant brought a strong technical and public relations approach that incorporated science and the community.

A truthful and direct approach with the general public and key stakeholders was also important. A clear message was crafted which focused on results, not fees. However, expectations were controlled by stressing the utility was a key step but only one step toward solutions.

A sound stormwater program and public relation strategy were developed and followed, through rough and smooth times.

One local staff person was in charge of all aspects of the planning and implementation. This person, the superintendent of public works, acted as the effort's focal point and champion investing the time and effort needed to ensure the utility's successful development. The superintendent now manages both the public works and the stormwater utility.

The City of Griffin advises communities interested in establishing a stormwater utility to spend a little money up-front to conduct an economic analysis. The creation of a utility is a challenge and not necessarily a popular political decision. Furthermore, a stormwater utility may not fit every community because each municipal service center has its own character and needs. An economic analysis will allow the community to determine the cost-benefit ratio of a stormwater utility and to get a feel for the level of support that exists among elected and appointed officials. For the City of Griffin, informing and educating the public and elected officials on the cost-benefits of the program was the key for achieving a unified stormwater management utility that addresses water quality and quantity issues.

system (GIS) and global positioning system (GPS) were included in the new information systems purchased. Clerical help was added along with two environmental technicians and two five-man crews for operations and maintenance of the stormwater system. The environmental technicians are trained in soil erosion and sedimentation and water quality testing. The director of public works remains responsible for the overall operation and success of Griffin's stormwater utility.

As part of the program, a memorandum of agreement was established with Spalding County, whereby drainage problems common to both jurisdictions are jointly resolved and financed. The two communities are currently addressing a stormwater volume problem due to impervious surfaces in the city that are causing downstream erosion in the county.

Technical Considerations

The Florida Association of Stormwater Utilities and the National Association of Floodplain Stormwater Management Agencies were used as sources of information and data in planning the utility. Technical assistance was received from two consulting firms; Ogden Environmental and Energy Services, Inc. provided planning and data modeling assistance and supplied GIS, aerial photography, and other data modeling tools, while Water Resources Associates, Inc. helped create the utility and the utility rate ordinance.

The Ogden team took the city through a two-step action plan process to determine program needs first and then program direction. This process included:

- defining the existing stormwater program components (staffing, financial resources and sources, activities, and controls and systems);
- assessing the existing and anticipated problems, needs, and issues facing the city;
- determining stormwater program priorities in each of the key program areas;
- estimating resources and costs for a three- to five-year stormwater program with less

detailed ten-year estimates and determining funding feasibility for a suite of potential funding methods, policies, and sources;

- planning for public information and education; and
- determining how to develop the billing database.

The final development of the stormwater utility was implemented through four parallel, interconnected components: program, finance, billing, and public education.

The establishment of Griffin's stormwater utility also prompted the development of a comprehensive water management strategy that uses a holistic approach to watershed management. The effort integrates land use, water resource, and floodplain management plans through hydrologic and hydraulic modeling, watershed assessments, master planning of capital improvements, and stormwater management activities such as: the jet-vac cleaning of stormwater system lines, replacing and installing lines, inspection of culverts, removal of debris, etc.

Financial Considerations

The cost of service analysis undertaken as part of the planning process was used in designing the rate structure, which is adequate to support the utility's annual operations budget of \$1.2 million. The rates are equitably assessed based on the demand a user places on the drainage system.

The national average monthly stormwater utility charge is just under \$3.00 per household. Griffin charges \$2.95 per month per residence or per every 2200 square feet of impervious area on nonresidential properties. The utility's construction and infrastructure replacement and improvements strategies are tied to the city's capital improvement budget and financed by revenues, loans, grants, and—in the near future—revenue bonds.

One million in Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) funds helped establish Griffin's stormwater utility by paying for capital