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River Forest considers new ways to pay for flood relief

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Contributing Reporter

A new storm sewer mainline must be installed on Greenfield Street to help keep basements in north River Forest from flooding. The cost is considerable — an estimated \$13 million — and money in the fund that covers operating and maintaining the century's old water and sewer systems isn't sufficient for the job.

The village will seek grants and low interest loans to help with the expenses, but another revenue stream is necessary to pay the expenses associated with the project.

River Forest officials are looking at several options. But in selecting the best approach, trustees also may have to consider the fairness issue. Though all properties benefit indirectly from the system, those who benefit directly may be required to pay for its upkeep.

Trustees are committed to the project. Settling how to pay for it could come later this summer, Village Administrator Eric Palm said.

One fund covers the operation and maintenance of River Forest's combined sewer system. This year, an estimated \$3.8 million will be brought in from a combined water/sewer fee, a bill paid by everyone who gets and uses water in town. Water/sewer is an enterprise fund, which was created to operate the system without tax revenues.

Salaries and benefits of department employees, water purchases from Chicago (approximately \$1.5 million) and other related expenses are paid with these funds. As much as 30 percent is set aside for emergency repairs and other contingencies, Palm said.

About \$720,000 will pay for a new main on Thatcher Avenue, new water meters and other upgrades, he added. And stopping all other important water-sewer improvements slated over the next five years to tackle this one project will be impossible.

"Because we have to create this massive sewer project doesn't mean we don't have other needs," Palm said. "Other needs will continue to occur."

That's why settling on other funding sources will be important, village officials say.

A property tax rate increase is one possibility. Because River Forest is a non-home-rule community, a referendum would have to be placed on the ballot, allowing the village to issue bonds to cover the cost of the work and pay off the debt.

An increase in the water and sewer bill would be another option. Voters would not have to approve that.

Some in River Forest have floated the idea of increasing both property taxes and the water/sewer fee. Even with a combined approach, a small segment of the community — property owners — could wind up paying more for improvements that the entire community would benefit from.

A third option is the initiation of a storm water utility fee. Storm water runoff would be managed as a utility and billed as a fee. The fee is based on the concept that every property in a watershed contributes runoff and should support the operation, maintenance and rehabilitation, according to Scott Shumard, city manager of Sterling, which is considering a similar fee.

The amount would be proportional to the amount of "impervious area" on the property, Shumard said. An impervious surface is a hard surface that does not allow rain to absorb into the ground, increasing the amount of storm water runoff. Examples are roofs. parking lots. streets. sidewalks. and driveways. said Jesse Elam. principal

...from water runoff, examples of fees, parking fees, access, education, and incentives, and case study, principal planner with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, or CMAP.

Revenue from the fee, which can be assessed monthly or bi-monthly — any way the village chooses — would be used to maintain and improve the infrastructure that transports storm water in River Forest, Elam said.

Any home or institution that gets a water bill, including churches, schools, shopping centers and businesses could be affected by such a fee, Shumard said.

The fee is catching on both inside and outside Illinois. Aurora, Bloomington, Downers Grove, Highland Park, Moline, Morton, Normal, East Moline, Richton Park, Freeport, Rock Island and Rolling Meadows already have taken it up. Wilmette and Northbrook are looking at it.

Cities in California, Florida, Michigan, Maryland and North Carolina have tacked on the fee as well, according to a survey conducted last year by Western Kentucky University.

Richton Park's residents, who were continually flooded out of their homes, demanded that something be done to alleviate the situation. After two years of study — and a lot of lobbying by residents — village officials in 2009 decided to tack on a quarterly fee to water and sewer bills to pay for improvements, said Hal Bittinger, Richton Park's finance director. Homeowners pay an extra \$18; all other property owners pay an extra \$36.

The fee brings in about \$400,000 annually and has covered the cost of two containment ponds; a third is under construction.

The fee was the best solution to a critical community issue, Bittinger noted.

"Some people who weren't affected by the flooding grumbled about the increase. Others wanted a solution no matter how much it cost, Bittinger said. "[The stormwater utility fee] was the only way we could get this project done. It's been an invaluable tool for us."

In communities that support sustainability and green initiatives, like River Forest, a stormwater utility fee can promote good stewardship and encourage conservation, Elam said.

Credits and incentives can be offered for measures that will lessen the impact on the system. Downers Grove offsets the fee for residents or businesses that implement green initiatives like a rain barrel to capture runoff, plant a rain garden, install a green roof, cisterns or permeable pavers, according to Doug Kozlowski, spokesman for Downers Grove, which initiated a fee earlier this year.

In Champaign, which started the fee in May, officials say they've gotten a lot of positive feedback about the credits and incentives; people are taking advantage of them. Offering them was partly a matter of economics, said Eleanor Blackmon, assistant city engineer for the city of Champaign.

"The city realizes that people can only take in so much of fees or taxes and wanted people to be able to reduce their bills as well as reduce the runoff. They're saving in two ways," Blackmon said. "The city council instituted the fee because it realized that the fee was more equitable, especially if it goes to a dedicated fund, which this one does."