
SURFACE WATER ASSESSMENT

In 2013, the Pinellas County Board of Commissioners implemented a Surface Water Assessment in unincorporated Pinellas County. The assessment appears on your Truth in Millage Notice and on your tax bill under the non-ad valorem section. We hope the following answers to common questions will help increase awareness of the importance of fixing our flooding problems, repairing our infrastructure and protecting our lakes, streams, and bays from stormwater pollution. For more information, call (727) 464-8759.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

▪ **What is a surface water assessment?**

A surface water assessment is a user fee for stormwater services. It is similar to a fee for the availability of water or sewer service at your home or business.

▪ **What kind of services does the county provide for surface water management?**

The list of services related to surface water management is lengthy. In summary, the county provides services to reduce flooding and improve water quality to operate and maintain existing stormwater facilities (such as public ponds, ditches and culverts) and to monitor and restore the health of our aquatic resources.

▪ **Why am I being charged now when I haven't been in the past?**

Recent federal regulations requiring a comprehensive stormwater quality management program necessitate that the county take a more active role in managing stormwater. The surface water assessment will enable the county to manage the stormwater system more closely, improve the condition of our infrastructure, study the impacts of stormwater on the natural environment, seek out and eliminate illicit connections and illegal discharges, and enforce codes more proactively.

▪ **Why has Pinellas County chosen to implement a separate fee for surface water management?**

By establishing a dedicated funding source through an assessment, the county can ensure that revenue required in managing and maintaining this important system is available. A fee based on the impervious surface area is an equitable way to charge and collect revenues for this program. Due to added impervious or hardened areas in urban environments, more runoff has been created that can cause flooding, erosion and pollution. The fee will fund ongoing maintenance of county-owned storm drainage infrastructure, as well as water quality monitoring, evaluation, and improvements.

▪ **Will the revenues from the fee go to the general fund for everyone to use?**

No, the revenues will be placed in a separate fund that, by ordinance, can only be spent for surface water activities. This is one of the major advantages of this fee – it can only be used to address surface water management issues.

▪ **Will I still be charged even if it does not rain for a long time?**

Because surface water fees are not based upon the frequency or amount of rainfall received, the surface water assessment will be administered regardless of rainfall. In fact, the best time to fix stormwater problems is when it is dry.

▪ **My property drains entirely or partially to a waterbody. Do I still need to pay?**

The Pinellas County Surface Water Assessment covers stormwater and associated surface water management services within all of Unincorporated Pinellas County. This includes maintenance of County stormwater conveyances as well as monitoring and assessment of lakes, streams, and marine waters which receive flow from these conveyances and runoff from adjacent parcels - which tie to inspections and regulatory requirements the County is responsible for. Mitigation credits are available for properties that discharge directly to tidal waters.

BILLING

▪ **How is the rate on my bill established?**

In Pinellas County, the median impervious surface area found on a single-family property is 2,339 square feet. This is called an Equivalent Residential Unit (ERU). The assessment for non single family home properties is determined by dividing the amount of the property's impervious surface by 2,339 sq. ft. multiplied by the yearly charge of \$117.74.

Single-family homes are divided into three tiers:

- Small (less than 1,576 sq. ft. of impervious) pay \$70.64/year.
- Medium (1,577 to 4,368 sq. ft.) pay \$117.74/year.
- Large (4,379 to 9,999 sq. ft.) pay \$270.80/year
- Very large homes (>10,000 sq. ft. of impervious) are charged similarly to non-single family home properties.

▪ **What is an impervious area?**

An impervious surface is any hard surface that does not absorb water and impedes the natural flow of water into the soil. In general, impervious surfaces include hard surfaces such as buildings, garages, and parking lots, as well as other hard surfaces.

▪ **How did the county determine impervious surface area?**

Single family homes' impervious area is based on data from the Pinellas County Property Appraiser's (PAO) datasets, using the base area plus add-ons (called appurtenances) and appropriate extra features data (such as patios). Other non single family homes impervious data is based on digitized recent aerial photography.

▪ **Why is the county using the tax bill to collect this fee?**

The county is using the tax bill to deliver the surface water assessment because it

saves on billing and other administrative costs and it provides incentive to property owners who pay early or through the payment plan.

▪ **My property is tax exempt / I currently claim certain tax exemptions / I do not currently pay property taxes. Do I still have to pay?**

All customers within unincorporated Pinellas County that have impervious surfaces must pay regardless of ownership or tax status because they generate runoff that the County has to manage.

▪ **I currently claim a deduction on my income taxes for my property tax. Can I claim this fee as a deduction?**

This is a question for your tax advisor. However, in general, a residential property is not a valid income tax deduction for your personal taxes. Please contact your accountant or income tax preparer for advice.

▪ **What happens if I don't pay my bill?**

If you don't pay your bill, you risk having a lien placed on your property.

REDUCING MY FEE

▪ **How can I reduce my fee?**

The county has developed a Credit Policy and Procedures Manual. Information can be found at www.pinellascounty.org/surfacewater.

▪ **I have stormwater ponds on my property that I pay to maintain. Can I get a credit?**

Stormwater ponds do provide some benefits to the county by reducing the stormwater runoff that enters the county's drainage system. However, onsite ponds do not completely eliminate the impacts from the stormwater runoff or the need for stormwater services from the county. The county is still required to provide services to manage stormwater runoff from larger storms than the pond is designed to control, comply with new federal stormwater regulations, and proactively plan and manage the operation and improvement of the county's drainage system. The county has developed a credit policy that would provide a partial credit to customers that own and maintain permitted ponds.

▪ **How can I be exempted from the surface water assessment?**

Customers with less than 200 square feet of total impervious surface or agricultural parcels are exempted from the fee.

ADJUSTING MY FEE

▪ **What do I do if there is a mistake on my bill?**

The county has developed a Credit Policy and Procedures Manual that provides the details to deal with adjustments. There is a form for customers to fill out and the county will consider whether or not an adjustment is warranted. If warranted, county staff will correct your bill. If county staff does not feel that the correction is warranted, there will be an appeals process. Information can be found at

www.pinellascounty.org/surfacewater.

FUNDING

▪ **What are some advantages of a surface water assessment rather than a tax?**

An assessment based on impervious surfaces is more appropriate since each customer will be charged based on the impervious area of their property.

▪ **Why is a surface water assessment more equitable than a tax?**

A property's value does not affect runoff, so property taxes are not the most accurate way to pay for surface water services. For example, a high-rise building and a shopping mall may have similar appraised values and pay similar property taxes. However, the shopping mall produces much more runoff because of the amount of parking and rooftops.

▪ **Do other cities and counties have a similar assessment or fee?**

In Florida, it is estimated that there are about 140 cities and counties with a surface water related fee. In Pinellas County, 15 municipalities or about 65 percent of county residents and businesses currently pay a fee. Other counties in Florida that have a fee include Pasco, Hillsborough, Sarasota, Bay, Brevard, Charlotte, Leon, Marion, Miami-Dade, and Volusia.

BENEFITS

▪ **What am I going to get out of this assessment?**

The revenues from this fee will be used to work on the reduction of street and structural flooding, provide better planning for the future, increase the maintenance of the stormwater system, increase the frequency of stormwater system repair, reduce sedimentation and erosion, and reduce stormwater pollution.

▪ **How soon can I expect to see improvements for flooding issues in my area?**

Because there are numerous areas in the county that have major flooding problems, you may not see improvements in your area immediately. This does not mean they will not be fixed. Problem areas will be prioritized and a project schedule developed.

FOR INFORMATION AND QUESTIONS

Phone: (727) 464-8759

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