

Mayor talks up benefits of stormwater utility

BY BILL CLEVERLEY, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 10, 2011

Creating a new utility to manage Victoria's \$362-million stormwater sewer system would not be the start of a new tax but rather a tax shift, say city officials.

"We recognize that it is all one taxpayer. Whether you get one, two or three bills, at the end of the month you sit down and say here's my bills that come from the city," said Mayor Dean Fortin.

The idea of creating a new stormwater utility, like a water or sewer utility, will be discussed at the city's environment and infrastructure committee today.

"I think the advantage for the city is twofold: one, the income you get from it you directly relate it back so it doesn't just go into property taxes. The income that comes in from it goes directly to that resource," Fortin said.

"Secondly, you as an individual can say, 'My payment is going into this and I can reduce or increase the amount of cost by myself.' "

Fortin said there are a variety of ways, ranging from using rain barrels to decreasing the amount of impervious surfaces on a lot that a property owner might use, to lower stormwater costs.

"There's many things you can do quite easily to lower your impact. So part of what we're looking at is what is your square footage in terms of impervious surfaces. Are you capturing [rain water]? There are opportunities for people to lower their costs."

The new utility would be "user-pay," a more fair and flexible way to finance the burgeoning costs of the city's geriatric stormwater system, say city staff.

"Those moneys that go in there are no longer on your general taxes, they're on your utility bill. So people will know exactly what they end up paying for," said city director of sustainability Kim Fowler. "It gives us much more administrative authority to govern incentives and provide different rates for better services. So if people use a lot they're going to pay more. If someone puts in some sustainable systems and actually reduce that significantly, as we've done on Dockside Green, then we can give them a lower utility rate."

A staff report says creating a stormwater utility would not only create a dedicated source of funding for rehabilitation and replacement but also provide the ability to encourage environmentally friendly stormwater projects, greater potential to tap into green infrastructure grants and the ability to set rates to build up reserves.

Most municipalities rely on property taxes to fund stormwater-related items but Guelph, Kitchener, Waterloo, Richmond Hill, and Hamilton are looking at land drainage or stormwater utilities, says the report.

Like Victoria's aging sanitary sewers, the city's stormwater sewers need a lot of work.

If the concept is approved by council, a public engagement process would be launched. The earliest the new utility would be launched would be January 2013.

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