

# Boston Water and Sewer Commission

980 Harrison Avenue  
Boston, MA 02119



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## New Stormwater Utility Will Help Modernize Infrastructure and Support Cleaner Waterways

**Boston, Mass.**, June 29, 2023 – Early next year, the Boston Water and Sewer Commission (BWSC) will launch a new stormwater utility that will meet an increased need to modernize Boston’s stormwater infrastructure and better prepare for climate change. The proposed stormwater utility will restructure BWSC’s current billing by creating a stormwater charge, as well as credit and grant programs that will allow customers to reduce their stormwater charge by performing approved stormwater management activities. The credit and grant programs are being included as part of the stormwater utility following months of conversation with the City of Boston.

BWSC expects that ***the majority of residential customers will not see an increase in their overall bill because the new billing structure includes a reduction to the existing sewer rate.*** The funds from the new stormwater charge will help make necessary improvements to Boston’s stormwater management systems to better prepare the City for more frequent and intense storms, mitigate flooding, and reduce the amount of polluted runoff draining to the city’s waterways. Ahead of the launch, BWSC will undertake a six-month public outreach campaign, during which BWSC will solicit feedback and share information about the proposed stormwater utility with the public.

“The stormwater charge is a fairer and more equitable way to support stormwater services,” said Henry Vitale, Executive Director of BWSC. “There are some properties in the City of Boston—such as parking lots—that are not billed for water and sewer, yet these properties have a significant impact on the amount of stormwater runoff that must be managed. We’re proposing that these property owners will have ‘stormwater only’ accounts and pay a stormwater charge.”

The new stormwater charge will allow BWSC and its partners to modernize infrastructure while allowing Boston to address additional growing challenges posed by both climate change and urban development’s expanding footprint.

Stormwater is generated when precipitation falls on hard impervious surfaces like roofs, driveways, roads, or sidewalks and “runs off,” rather than absorbing into the ground as it would in nature. When stormwater flows over hard surfaces, it collects litter, sediment, and other pollutants, like motor oil and fertilizer. Catch basins in our roadways capture stormwater and convey it through a network of underground pipes called storm drains. Storm drains then release stormwater into our water bodies via stormwater outfalls. Stormwater does not receive

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treatment at the Deer Island wastewater treatment plant, which means that all the pollutants carried by stormwater enter our lakes, rivers, streams, and Boston Harbor.

In a city that receives an average of 48 inches of rainfall annually, stormwater runoff also contributes to inland flooding. Due to climate change, storms are becoming more frequent and more intense, which will result in more flooding in the coming years if BWSC and the City do not begin to adapt now.

To respond to these challenges, Boston must make improvements to our aging storm drain system, add storage capacity and stormwater treatment, and increase maintenance activities throughout the City. Infrastructure improvements will include pipe replacement and upsizing to accommodate larger volumes of water; stormwater storage features, like stormwater trenches, chambers, vaults, and other infiltration features that will be implemented wherever feasible; and additional staff, training, and equipment to facilitate more frequent and effective maintenance for all stormwater infrastructure, both gray and green.

Green infrastructure (GI) will also be a key component of Boston's stormwater management strategy. GI features mimic the natural water cycle, using plants, soil and other natural materials to capture, filter, store and infiltrate stormwater back into the ground. These features come in all shapes and sizes and have many benefits beyond stormwater management. Benefits include increasing urban tree canopy, mitigating urban heat islands, improving air quality, as well as providing access to green space and improving mental health among urban dwellers. BWSC and the City are currently building and expanding our GI Programs, which include GI planning, design, construction, maintenance, and monitoring activities. GI features like rain gardens, bioswales, bioretention areas, tree infiltration trenches, constructed wetlands, etc. will be deployed in Environmental Justice communities and areas that are already disproportionately experiencing the effects of climate change. These features will not only remove pollutants and provide much-needed stormwater storage to reduce localized flooding but will help create a more beautiful and healthy city.

The proposed stormwater charge will be used exclusively for stormwater management and will be based on the amount of impervious surface on a property. This is the most common basis for stormwater charges across the country and will more accurately reflect the cost of collecting and managing stormwater. Additionally, customers that currently receive BWSC's elderly and disability discounts (30% on water and sewer charges) will have those discounts automatically applied to the stormwater charge.

Since BWSC's creation in 1977, its investment in sewer and stormwater infrastructure modernization has resulted in dramatic water quality improvements in Boston Harbor, its beaches, and tributary rivers. In 2012, BWSC filed a consent decree settlement to enhance its efforts to comply with the Clean Water Act, as well as clean and revitalize Boston Harbor and its tributaries, including the Charles, Neponset, and Mystic Rivers.

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The revenue generated by the stormwater charge will fund BWSC's regulatory compliance responsibilities, while also supporting a more resilient future. BWSC will make investments in measures that improve water quality, increase public awareness and protect the environment, including:

- New storm drain infrastructure
- Repair and replacement of existing infrastructure
- Green infrastructure
- Installation of stormwater control measures
- Outfall restoration
- Numerous other drainage improvement projects

A growing number of U.S. cities, including over 20 municipalities in Massachusetts, have implemented stormwater utilities. Stormwater charges have been embraced nationwide as a more equitable approach to funding infrastructure modernization and better management of stormwater runoff.

Boston's stormwater system is New England's largest and consists of over 30,000 catch basins and 600 miles of pipe conveying stormwater to more than 250 outfalls. BWSC customers currently pay for stormwater management through the rates charged for sewer service. In the past, when sewage and stormwater were managed with one set of "combined sewer" pipes, using sewer charges to pay for stormwater management made sense. Now that BWSC has largely separated Boston's combined system, the proposed stormwater utility will separate out charges for stormwater from the charges for sewer.

BWSC is in the process of determining the final amount of the proposed stormwater charge. However, customers can access more information about the proposed stormwater utility (stormwater charge, credit program, and grant program), as well as a bill estimator tool, on the BWSC webpage at <https://www.bwsc.org/stormwater>.

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