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**County explores new fee to meet drainage rules
Residents may pay \$40 to \$50 per year**

By Andrea Uhde

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Oldham County taxpayers may be charged a new fee to help the county meet federal regulations dealing with storm-water runoff.

A group of county and city officials is exploring the possibility of a utility fee that could cost homeowners \$40 to \$50 a year, according to rough estimates.

Businesses could pay more than homeowners, depending on the size of their impervious surface, which is property such as rooftops that doesn't soak up rainwater, said County Engineer Beth Stuber.

But La Grange residents may not have to pay the fee because the city has not been mandated by the federal government to participate, Stuber said. The city could decide to participate or may later be required to do so by the federal government, she said.

Stuber said if there is a new utility fee, it could be added to either the tax bill or water or sewer bills.

The money would allow the county to pay for staff, maintenance and other expenses needed to comply with new county ordinances required by the federal government to address storm-water runoff.

The ordinances, adopted within the last four years, cover illegal discharges into storm sewers, runoff on construction sites and new developments, and prevention or reduction of polluting runoff.

They also include public education and public involvement.

The new federal requirements are part of the Clean Water Act and aim to keep runoff including oil and pesticides from polluting local creeks, rivers and lakes.

Besides posing health risks and affecting wildlife, too much sediment in a waterway can also worsen flooding, Stuber said.

The regulations already have been applied to larger communities including Louisville, where residents pay \$10.04 every two months.

Oldham County and dozens other urban areas in Kentucky including Bowling Green and Bullitt County are part of the second phase. Crestwood, Pewee Valley, Goshen, River Bluff, Orchard Grass and some unincorporated areas are in that phase.

Buckner resident Dewey Wotring said he believes the county will take in more money than it needs.

"The question people need to ask is, how much money do they actually need and how much are they going to try to raise," he said. "This administration does not know how to manage money. They only know how to take -- and I mean take -- more money from the people."

Deputy Judge-Executive Paula Gish said they are looking into exactly what all the expenses will be.

"We're going to be cost-effective, we're going to be fair, and we're also going to think long-term," she said. "We don't want to start having a utility fee that's going to be very short-sited."

Stuber said they haven't received any money from the federal government to pay for the mandate, and any utility fee funds would be in an account exclusively for storm-water related activities.

A storm water advisory committee of county and city officials and a storm-water consultant has spent more than four years working to address the federal regulations.

The work will cost Oldham County government about \$275,000 just for this year, Gish said. The cities are also paying a portion of the consultant's fee.

"This is the part where we're actually saying, 'we've been paying for this thing out of the general fund for four years, and we can't afford it any longer,'" Stuber said. "We're going to seriously have to look" at a utility fee.

Stuber said the county will need an estimated \$500,000 to \$1 million each year to enforce the ordinances. She said the money will help pay for such things as three or four more inspectors, another engineer, maintenance crews, protection and restoration of waterways, and maintenance and educational programs.

The county usually enforces the storm-water ordinances now only when there is a complaint, Stuber said.

She said officials usually visit a subdivision only two or three times during construction to look for any storm-water runoff issues. She said they should be there as often as once a

week, if possible, and every new house should be inspected. The county now only inspects a "small fraction" of the houses being built, she said.

"We're not doing it as we should now," she said.

The Environmental Protection Agency hasn't fined the county, "but it's a strong possibility if we continue the way we're going that we will be fined," Stuber said, adding that the agency's fines are usually "severe."

Fiscal Court would have the final say on a utility fee, she said.

Consultant URS Corp. of Louisville is doing a study to determine the fee amount for households and businesses. The fee would be the same for all houses, but it could be more for businesses, depending the impervious surface.

County and city officials will then consider that estimated fee and see if there are any other services that could be cut, Stuber said.

Faced with a projected \$2 million deficit, Oldham County officials say they have been cutting a number of costs and re-engineering the work flow in several departments to save money. Murner laid off 10 county employees last year, and the road department eliminated two other positions.

In November, Fiscal Court voted to double the insurance-premium tax to 10 percent and add 50 cents a month to the fees paid by anyone in the county with a land-line phone.

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