

New stormwater fee likely \$5 a month

sewer district mapped homeowners' hard surfaces

BY JEFF DAVIS
Plain Dealer Reporter

Go ahead, blame it on Jeff Duke. The 43-year-old self-professed "map geek" has been leading a five-year effort by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District to figure out just how much of the region we've paved over. The answer: 48,000 acres. Duke's work will be used as a road map for the sewer district's new stormwater Management Program,

a \$35 million annual effort to curb flooding in the region by managing stormwater runoff.

But it will also be used to bill you. Sewer district officials have begun mailing more than a quarter million letters notifying residential customers that they will be charged a new fee beginning Jan. 1 to pay for the program.

The typical homeowner served by the sewer district will pay \$5.05 a month — less for senior citizens or lower-income residents who

qualify for assistance.

The fee will appear on quarterly water and sewer bills.

Using satellite imagery, aerial photographs and property data, Duke and his staff of six have zoomed in on one of the region's most pressing issues: impervious surfaces that keep rain and snow from soaking into the ground.

They've taken a parcel-by-parcel look at roughly 400,000 commercial and residential properties.

SEE SEWER | A6

The three tiers

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District has a three-tier schedule for new fees to manage stormwater runoff.

Tier 1: Properties with less than 2,000 square feet of hard surface will be charged \$3.03 a month.

Tier 2: Properties with 2,000 to 3,999 square feet of impervious surface will pay \$5.05 a month.

Tier 3: Properties with 4,000 or more square feet of hard surface will pay \$9.09 a month.

SEWER

FROM A1

New stormwater fee likely \$5 a month

"I love this stuff," Duke said during a recent interview as he projected an image of his home in Brook Park onto a large screen to demonstrate how his mapping software calculates the square footage of hard surface — typically roof tops, driveways and patios.

The hard surface at Duke's home measures just over 2,000 square feet, meaning he will be charged \$5.05 a month by the sewer district beginning next year. (Property owners can check the square footage of their hard surface online at neorsd.org/findmyfee.)

"Our policy says that we do not bill for impervious area in the public right of way," said Duke.

"That includes streets, sidewalks, driveway aprons."

A quarter of the fee collected will go back to the communities where residents live to pay for local projects to maintain and improve waterways and upgrade sewers.

The bulk of the money will be

used by the sewer district to tackle the region's flooding problems.

Sewer district officials plan to begin by walking every foot of the 400 miles of waterways in the 62 communities that are part of the stormwater program.

That includes most of Cuyahoga County and small parts of three other adjoining counties. They will catalog problems and use the information to create a master plan.

But they also have scheduled several projects for 2013, including repairing the Horsehoe Lake Dam in Shaker Heights; rebuilding a long stretch of Doan Brook as it flows through Rockefeller Park in Cleveland and reinforcing the bank of Mill Creek along Warner Road in Garfield Heights.

Sewer district officials acknowledge that the new fee is coming at a bad time for many customers.

Many in the area are without jobs, and the district's customers saw increases over the last year in sewer and water rates.

But sewer officials say efforts to manage flooding — and the damage it causes to property and water quality — have been put on hold for decades.

Sewer district officials had planned to implement the program two years ago, but that move was put on hold when the district got tangled up in a lawsuit with a group of property owners, property associations and about a dozen suburbs.

Opponents of the program said the district did not have the authority to create a regional stormwater program and they contended that the fee was really a tax that should have been put to voters.

So far, the courts have rejected those arguments.

Jordan Berns, a lawyer leading the opposition, said he expects the 8th Ohio District Court of Appeals to consider the issues again early next year.

"My view is that this is not a necessary program," said Berns, who believes that managing stormwater should be left to individual cities, which he said have spent millions on the problem in the last several years.

Meanwhile, sewer district officials are moving forward.

For residential properties, they have created a three-tier fee schedule. Tier 1 properties, those with less than 2,000 square feet of hard surface, will be charged \$3.03 a month. Tier

2 properties with 2,000 to 3,999 square feet of impervious surface will be charged \$5.05 monthly, and properties with 4,000 or more square feet will pay \$9.09.

The sewer district has two programs meant to provide financial help for people with limited incomes.

The Homestead program is for senior citizens age 65 or older or disabled homeowners with an income of \$30,500 or less.

People who are approved for this program will pay a monthly stormwater fee of \$2.03 regardless of the amount of hard surface on their property.

There also is an Affordability program for any homeowner whose income is less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. That's currently \$44,700 for a family of four. This program provides a 40 percent reduction of the appropriate tier fee.

Property owners can participate in only one assistance program. For more information call the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District at 216-881-8247.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter, ddavis@plaind.com, 216-999-4808.