

# Countywide stormwater program proposed

**Voluntary cooperative effort could involve small monthly fee, if approved**

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ROBERTSDALE -- Baldwin's flooding problems are on the rise as development sends more water downstream, and a countywide authority is needed to fix the problem, officials at a stormwater management meeting said Thursday.

State, county and municipal officials met Thursday with members of the Mobile Bay Estuary Program and other community groups to discuss proposals to establish a Baldwin Stormwater Management Cooperative.

The cooperative would be a voluntary association of local governments that would coordinate efforts to manage drainage in the area.

The proposed group would not have the authority to pass or enforce regulations, but would allow existing groups, municipal councils and the County Commission to work together to create ordinances and set requirements for drainage, said Andy Reese, a consultant working on the project,

Without some form of management program, Baldwin residents and officials will see pollution and flooding increase as development continues, Reese, vice president of AMEC of Nashville, Tenn., told officials at the Baldwin County Annex in Robertsdale.

"Rapid growth increases flooding, two, three, four times and pollution four or five times," he said. "The volume of water fills stream beds, erodes creek banks."

Reese said most stream beds develop to handle the flow of the runoff from the type of storm that might hit an area every two years. If more paving increases that amount, the stream will expand its banks, creating erosion and flooding problems in areas where none existed before.

He said that in a forest or field, about 90 percent of the water soaks back into the aquifer rather than running into creeks.

"Development that is not handled properly reverses that, with 90 percent running into the creek, and that wreaks havoc with the hydrological cycle," he said.

Water flow, however, does not follow political boundaries, meaning towns and cities have no authority beyond their corporate limits over upstream development that could affect property within the municipalities

Reese said officials need to consider the impact of drainage when making plans just as they would other effects of development.

"You make plans for roads, sewer, water, but no plans for drainage," he said. "We put in a 40-acre subdivision and allow water to flow into the creek and figure nature can handle it, but that creek is like a sewer main, it's designed to handle a certain amount of flow."

The proposed system would be a cooperative agreement between the county and municipalities. Only councils that wanted to join the group would take part, said David Yeager, director of the Mobile Bay Estuary Program.

Reese said more than 700 such systems have been set up around the country. He said that in most similar programs, property owners are charged a fee, usually less than \$5 a month for a standard-sized home. He said that in Baldwin, the fee might be about \$3, but the amount has not been determined.

Larger developments would be charged more based on the amount of paved or covered surfaces, said Reese.

"The more you pave, the more you pay," he said.

Developers who make efforts to reduce runoff, such as by installing systems that allow water to drain back into the ground rather than into streams, would receive discounts.

The fee structure should be enough to raise the \$2 million to \$3 million estimated to be needed to set up the system, Reese said.

About two-thirds of that amount will go to fixing existing problems, with the rest being used for education, monitoring planning and services to local governments, Reese said.

Reese said the county and all municipalities taking part in the program would have a voice in the authority. He said that votes could be based on population and land area, with larger cities and the county having more votes on the board, but that smaller communities would have proportional votes as well.

Yeager said that in order to set up the program, a local act will have to be passed in the Alabama Legislature. He said officials hope to have the bill introduced when the Legislature convenes for its next session in March.

"If not this year, maybe two or three years down the road, but we've got to get started on this," Yeager said.

He said promoters of the system will meet with city and town councils and the County Commission between now and the start of the session in March to ask local officials to support the program.