

FORT LAUDERDALE

Improvement costs to curb flooding steep

BY SUSANNAH BRYAN

With dual threats of tidal flooding and rising seas on the horizon, Fort Lauderdale is on the verge of hiking fees to pay for all the improvement projects needed to keep roads high and dry and protect property from flooding.

Fortifying the city will cost \$200 million, but officials have struggled for years to decide who will pay and how much. The solution they've hit upon will trigger steep increases across the board for so-called stormwater fees.

Owners of houses will see their rates increase 54%, from \$168 a year to \$258.26. The owner of a mansion valued at \$1 million will pay the same as the owner of a home valued at \$100,000.

Condo owners could see increases as high as 100% or more, but will still pay less than those who own a house.

The rate for the owner of a condo in a 110-unit building would rise by 78%, from \$42.55 to \$75.76. For the owner of a condo in a 370-unit building, the rate would rise 107%, from \$22.47 to \$46.63.

Businesses would also shoulder a bigger burden. A 120,000-square-foot grocery store would face a rate hike of 606%, with bills increasing from \$3,200 a year to \$22,585.

Is it fair?

To find the money, Fort Lauderdale came up with a new way of charging people: Instead of calculating fees based on the square footage of the property, the new rate also takes into account how many people drive to and from the property, measured in traffic trips. That's why condos and some commercial properties are seeing such a substantial increase.

The idea behind the new rate structure is that most flood prevention measures aim to safeguard roads, so the type of property that generates a lot of traffic, like a condo tower or a supermarket, has more to gain from drainage improvements than one that doesn't — and thus should pay more.

That's not the only change that's coming: Instead of billing the stormwater fee on your monthly water bill, it will now show up on your annual property tax bill. That's been a surprise to homeowners who in recent weeks got their preliminary tax notices.

"Now everybody's raising hell," Commissioner Robert McKinzie said. "You don't notice the water bill. But people pay attention to the tax bill. All they did was wake up the residents. They want to know, 'What's this new charge?' But they have been paying it all along on their water bill."

The money raised — \$29 million in the first year — will help cover a \$200 million bond that will be used to protect seven flood-prone neighborhoods from sea level rise, high tides and heavy rains by raising seawalls and bolstering retention areas to keep water where it belongs.

City officials say it's a fair way to determine what property owners should pay, but the huge increases for condos has some of their leaders crying foul.

"We have not been treated fairly," said Pio Ieraci, president of the Galt Mile Community Association representing 30 high-rise condos with 7,200 apartments and 16,000 residents. "The plan is not as good as it could be and it's not as fair to multi-family as it is to single family. That's the whole issue. There should be equity."

Fred Nesbitt, president of the Playa del Mar condo association on Galt Ocean Mile, said the fees for his association will more than double.

"Right now, our stormwater bill is \$8,400 a year. Under this new proposal it will go to \$18,000 a year," he said of the 370-unit building. "The bottom line is the city needs to raise \$200 million. And they couldn't see any other way to do it."

McKinzie says he's voted against stormwater rate hikes before and plans to do so again this year — but not because he thinks condos aren't getting a fair shake.

Even with the rate hike, the condo owners are still paying less than people who own houses, McKinzie says.

"Everybody should be paying the same," he said. "Why do they get preferential treatment? Some condos are larger than two-bedroom houses. We all should be paying our fair share. Everyone should be paying \$258."

Vice Mayor Steve Glassman scoffed at the idea that condos are getting preferential treatment.

"Believe me, condos are paying their fair share," Glassman said. "Some think condos are not getting charged enough and some think condos are getting ripped off. We must be doing something right because it's right in between that."

Mayor Dean Trantalis questioned the logic of basing stormwater rates on traffic trips back in 2017, but has since come around.

"I voted against it because the community felt left out of the decision-making process," Trantalis said this week. "The community was unfamiliar with the formula and I was uncomfortable with the methodology."

The new fee structure seems to make more sense, he said.

"I knew we had this looming problem we had to fix," Trantalis said. "Every year the flooding was getting worse, especially during king tide seasons."

More fees coming

The rate hike would help pay for \$200 million in flooding fixes for seven flood-prone neighborhoods: Edgewood, River Oaks, Dorsey Riverbend, Durrs, Progresso, Victoria Park and Southeast Isles.

Another rate hike would come in 2026, to raise another \$200 million to help fix flooding woes in the next set of neighborhoods.

Fort Lauderdale's stormwater system includes 187 miles of stormwater pipe, 1,263 manholes, 9,099 catch basins, 160 tidal valves and 13 drainage wells.

To help prepare for climate change, the city plans to install new drainage pipes and pumps, add tidal valves, elevate seawalls, and create more swales to give the water a place to go.

The city commission is expected to approve the new rates during a virtual budget hearing on Sept. 14 at 5:01 p.m.

If approved, the city would stop collecting the stormwater fee on the monthly utility bill starting in October, and instead bill property owners annually on their property tax bill starting this year. The tax bills are due by March 31, but can be paid as early as November.

This year's tax bill would include the stormwater fee from October 2020 through September 2021.

Under the current plan, rates would continue to increase 3% each year for another five years.

To see your proposed stormwater fee for next year, go to <https://gis.fortlauderdale.gov/StormwaterAssessment/>. You'll find a new interactive database where you can enter your address to see your bill.

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