



Questions and Answers About The Comprehensive Drainage Districts Proposal

Q. How many drainage districts are proposed?

A. There are five districts proposed to be established along watershed boundaries.

Q. What's a watershed?

A. A watershed is the land area that catches rain or snowmelt and drains into a common marsh, river, stream or lake.

Q. So there are five watersheds in Oakland County?

A. Actually, there are six. But only about 16 acres of the Belle River watershed extends into Oakland County. The five major watersheds in the county are the Clinton, Flint, Huron, Rouge and Shiawassee. Their size in Oakland County range from 370 square miles for the Clinton to 72 square miles for the Shiawassee.

Q. How many drainage districts are in Oakland County now?

A. There are hundreds of drains and drainage districts throughout the county. Drains come in all shapes and sizes from hundred-year-old open ditch farm drains to ultra-modern systems.

Q. Would the proposal combine all these drainage districts together?

A. That depends. That decision would remain in the hands of the local communities. In many cases, it would make good economic sense to combine the districts. In other situations it might be best to preserve the status quo.

Q. What are the advantages of combining all these drainage districts?

A. There are countless advantages. Administration is easier because you're dealing with only one drain and not 50 or 100. Cost to the communities is lower because of economies of scale, and, most important, projects and problems would be considered holistically rather than piecemeal. The impact on downstream communities would be taken into consideration.

- Q. I live in Orion Township. That means I'm in the same watershed as Royal Oak.**
A. That's correct
- Q. But my issues in my rural community are vastly different than urban Royal Oak.**
A. Right, again. This proposal takes that into consideration.
- Q. Suppose Royal Oak decides to upgrade one of its drains. Do I have to help pay for that because I'm in the same drainage district?**
A. Absolutely not! Any costs associated with a particular project are confined to the area of benefit. If your area doesn't benefit, you don't pay. A large project could benefit the entire district but to a different degree for particular areas. So those receiving a smaller benefit from the project would pay a smaller percentage.
- Q. So by the same token, Royal Oakers wouldn't have to pay for improvements in my neighborhood?**
A. Correct, again. Assessments can only be made on the area of benefit.
- Q. That sounds like a good rule. How can we be sure it doesn't get changed?**
A. It's more than a rule. It's the law!
- Q. How are these assessments made?**
A. There are three methods available to communities. They are property taxes, a special assessment or user fees.
- Q. Who decides which method is used?**
A. That's up to the individual communities involved. In fact, if a project extends beyond the boundaries of two or more municipalities, they can decide to utilize different funding methods.
- Q. So one town could use special assessments and another property taxes?**
A. That's right. And if a third community were involved, it could opt for user fees.
- Q. And the bills would come from the individual communities?**
A. That's one option. But my office can assist with that part of the administration and even issue the bills and statements. It's another benefit for the communities.
- Q. I live near an old open county drain that doesn't receive proper maintenance. Will these new Comprehensive Drains be poorly maintained?**
A. No. The drain you're talking about is an old Chapter 4 drain. Those are limited by law to a pre-assessment of just \$1,250 per mile per year for maintenance. That amount worked just fine a hundred years ago when the drain was built, but it is inadequate at today's needs. The new Comprehensive Drains will be established under a more modern section of the Drain Code that permits more realistic funding for maintenance.

- Q. What kind of projects can be tackled by these comprehensive districts?**
A. A myriad of problems can be addressed and solved from surface flooding and stormwater and sewer overflow, to soil erosion and sedimentation control. The communities involved determine the size and scope of the project.
- Q. It sounds like the communities play a key role in the decision-making process.**
A. Correct! The communities participate in all the key decisions. In fact, part of the process includes the establishment of subwatershed advisory groups made up of the member communities. As residents of the community, they have a great familiarity with the problems and can provide valuable insight.
- Q. So what role does the county drain commissioner play?**
A. I'm the facilitator. I can help wash away jurisdictional boundaries to ensure that communities can work cooperatively together.
- Q. I've heard that these comprehensive districts will be Chapter 20 drains. What's a Chapter 20 drain?**
A. That's an excellent question. There are many different types of drains and one of the ways they're distinguished is from which chapter of the Drain Code they're established. An old farm drain is identified in Chapter 4 of the Drain Code so they're often called Chapter 4 drains. They are special assessed by petition from property owners. Those types of drains can either be ditches or enclosed drains. A Chapter 20 drain, on the other hand, found in Chapter 20 of the Drain Code, is a more modern version that allows greater flexibility for problem-solving. Chapter 20 drains are established to protect public health. They do not venture beyond county boundaries. Municipalities, not individual property owners, must petition for the establishment of a Chapter 20 drain.
- Q. Hey, wait a minute. Don't these watersheds extend into neighboring counties?**
A. Yes, they do. Fortunately, Oakland County has a very good working relationship with its neighboring counties and can manage projects that cross county boundaries with straightforward inter-county governmental agreements. We're already doing that in other areas of county government.
- Q. In my rural area we have numerous surface water drains. You're not planning on lining them with concrete are you?**
A. Absolutely not! Most communities want to retain their unique character. That's why any important decisions on improvements remain the responsibility of the communities themselves. Proposed solutions will be thoroughly studied so alternatives can be considered. One size doesn't fit all. The end result must be the best solution for each particular problem.
- Q. How will the Comprehensive Drainage Districts impact the EPA's Phase II compliance requirements?**
A. Local governments aren't relieved of compliance requirements for local coverage. But they can utilize the county's pooled resources to cut costs -- especially in administration expenditures.

- Q. I'm still a little hazy on what EPA Phase II requirements actually are.**
A. This Federal Regulation is a part of the Clean Water Act of 1972 that continues to seek improved water quality. The focus is on urbanized communities that have separated storm sewer systems and where the majority of pollutants contaminate our surface waters. A number of large cities and businesses already comply with these regulations
- Q. Aren't there are a lot of communities in Oakland County that have fewer than 50,000 residents?**
A. Yes. But the federal government has added a few other factors in determining which communities are required to comply with Phase II mandates. In Oakland County that translates into 40 of our 61 communities.
- Q. If I am in a rural area or borderline area, why should I be interested in this process?**
A. The goal of watershed and stormwater management is to address water quality issues. Communities that have an interest in protecting or restoring water quality will find this program beneficial.
- Q. So by tapping into the county's financial clout, individual communities will be able to save some money?**
A. Absolutely! We'll provide assistance to communities in meeting the requirements of federal water quality mandates. Through a newly created watershed management program, we'll help with permit requirements, planning, public education and illicit discharge detection and elimination. We've already earmarked \$1 million to fund the first two years of the program. We also will be hiring environmental planners and engineering technicians to help focus on ways to maximize efficiencies that would not be financially possible at the local level.
- Q. And it's really the communities that decide what projects are undertaken, isn't that right?**
A. Absolutely. I'm a facilitator, not a dictator. You and your neighbors make the decisions, complete with all the normally required public hearings so everyone has a voice in the decisions.
- Q. It looks like some communities are in more than one watershed.**
A. Watersheds follow natural, not artificial municipal boundaries. That means some communities will find themselves in more than one Comprehensive Drainage District. If a community is in two districts, it will participate in the decision-making process in both districts.
- Q. And if it's in three or four districts, then it participates in the decision-making of each district?**
A. That's right.

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