This past February was the rainiest in recorded history, and Pennsylvania’s Department of Environmental Protection says that something needs to be done. So Cranberry’s officials and their consulting engineers are hard at work trying to find an answer. There’s real urgency. The Commonwealth is holding local governments responsible for coming up with plans that DEP accepts. If the Township is found to be out of compliance with state requirements, it could face six-figure fines. And the deadline is fast approaching. So what’s the problem?

It’s not just a Cranberry issue. All across the country, but especially in urbanized areas, the volume of stormwater draining into local streams has increased, along with a steady decline in the quality of that water. Both have largely resulted from a combination of construction, earthmoving, agricultural chemicals and road salt, along with increased paving.

While all of these changes have been going on for years, they have become a growing concern to public officials who worry about flooding, erosion, and stream contamination resulting from those environmental impacts. Lately, however, their worries have been accelerated by the state’s requirement to comply with new water conservation mandates and to find ways of paying for them.

As far back as 1972, Congress passed its Clean Water Act, which has been reinforced by increasingly tougher regulations over the years. Cranberry considers the Act’s goals to be worthwhile. But implementing its requirements is expensive. The federal Environmental Protection Agency, without providing funding, pushed fulfillment of the Act’s requirements onto the states. The states, in turn, pushed them onto local governments. To enforce compliance, Pennsylvania issues five-year permits to municipalities under the theory that stormwater from every new project ultimately drains into local streams and that all such streams belong to the Commonwealth. Last year, Cranberry submitted its proposal to meet the Act’s requirements for the next permit period, which included new measures to reduce erosion into Brush Creek. But even if approved, that permit will only be good until 2023, by which time its requirements are expected to become even stricter.

Right now, the cost of maintaining the Township’s municipal stormwater system, including catch basins, conduits and pipes, are paid out of its General Fund, financed by Cranberry’s income and property taxes. But with state mandates increasing, the costs of stormwater management are expected to grow significantly. Earlier this year, Cranberry retained HRG Engineering, a firm which has worked with a number of other Pennsylvania municipalities on stormwater issues, to help the Township figure out the most cost-effective ways of meeting the Act’s requirements.

Many Pennsylvania communities, including Mt. Lebanon, Meadville, Lancaster and Philadelphia have financed the repairs and improvements to their stormwater systems using the same approach as other utilities. Maryland, for example, has enacted a statewide stormwater fee, and other states are considering similar approaches. Like the user fees paid by customers of sewer and water systems, this approach shares the cost of compliance equitably with those who generate the impacts.

Whatever direction Cranberry’s strategy finally takes, both its design and ultimate success will require public outreach and involvement. Stay tuned.