

## Look ahead and behind to protect, restore river

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Bluffton's announcement that it had been selected to participate in a federal program on "smart growth" is good news.

The Environmental Protection Agency will offer its guidance and expertise as the town revises its zoning and development standards. As described by Kim Jones, the town's natural resources manager, the EPA will help selected communities "implement smart growth strategies to protect the environment, improve public health, create jobs, expand economic opportunity and improve overall quality of life."

The town should make sure that new development that comes in the days and years ahead does not negatively impact the May River and other local waterways. That means new construction must meet the goal of keeping the total amount of hard surfaces below thresholds that harm sensitive tidal creeks and rivers.

Business as usual, given the shellfish bed closures in the May and Okatie rivers, won't do.

But "smart growth" addresses just one aspect of a problem that by definition comes from many sources.

The town also must look at already approved plans that could contribute to further degradation of the May River. Thousands of lots have been approved for development in various planned communities throughout the town, which covers about 50 square miles. Every house, store, driveway, parking lot and road built adds to the problem unless the stormwater runoff is handled in a way that as closely as possible mimics Mother Nature.

In addition, stormwater systems for communities and commercial centers already built must be refitted to reduce and reverse the harm that has been done to the river.

The work -- if it's done right -- probably will cost millions of dollars, and it's not clear yet who would pay for what.

Beaufort County is moving on changes to its stormwater management ordinance that recognize that lots already approved but not built on are a critical part of a potential solution. On Monday,

County Council's Natural Resources Committee recommended the changes go to the full council. They would be added to existing stricter controls for new development and redevelopment.

County officials say the changes would affect about 22,000 "lots of record" in unincorporated Beaufort County that have been approved for development, but not built on. If a community's stormwater system doesn't meet the runoff standards, it would fall to lot owners to reduce their individual impact when they build. Examples of how that can be done include unpaved driveways and walkways and smaller roof surfaces.

If this tactic is to have a meaningful impact in the May River watershed, Bluffton would need to join the county in requiring that existing lots in already approved developments fall under the new standards.

It should be noted that Bluffton's promise to protect the river from harm has shifted to a pledge to clean up the river. How sad.

But the public must hold town officials to that.

The stated mission of a newly created town division is to prevent pollution and restore shellfish harvesting in all of the May River.

Town staff assigned to the division are charged with executing the May River Watershed Action Plan, which has been drafted by consultants. The public is to weigh in on the plan this summer, and the town is scheduled to adopt the plan in September.

Stormwater engineer Ron Bullman says the plan includes a list of projects not yet funded. Mayor Lisa Sulka has said the town will have to make tough decisions on paying for the plan once it's finished, but Town Council is committed to cleaning up the river.

Nearly 13 years have gone by since the town first promised it would protect the river as it annexed tens of thousands of acres and gave the go-ahead to build new communities where pines, hard woods and wetlands once dominated. Two years have passed since the state first closed the upper reaches of the May River to oyster harvesting and put harvesting conditions on about four miles of the river. Nearly a year has gone by since the state closed about half the river to shellfish harvesting.

Promises have been made, and they should be kept.