

Projects to help May River good news for Bluffton

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Published Saturday, January 21, 2012

Bluffton Town Council finally got a look at specific projects -- and their prices -- to help clean up the May River and restore shellfish harvesting to nearly half the once-pristine river.

The four projects are aimed at ensuring stormwater runoff is clean when it reaches the river, now closed to oystering in its upper reaches because of high counts of fecal coliform, an indicator of pollutants. They are the first projects Town Council has looked at since adopting the May River Watershed Action Plan in November.

The work would retrofit ponds in Hampton Lake (\$125,000) and Hampton Hall (\$85,000) to hold more water and release it more slowly, reducing the amount of pollutants water leaving the ponds picks up before reaching the river.

The town's Stormwater Management Division says these projects could improve how runoff is handled for about 5,200 acres of the river's watershed.

The third project would restore wetlands near Stoney Creek, part of the river's headwaters area. It calls for filling ditches that have moved the water through the wetlands so quickly that their natural cleaning capabilities have been "short-circuited."

The restoration would force runoff out of the ditches and allow it to flow across a much larger area, slowing it, increasing infiltration and evaporation and allowing pollutants to drop or be filtered out, according to the town's engineers. The cost is estimated at \$500,000 and could affect about 4,900 acres of the watershed.

The fourth project is a new stormwater pond west of Old Palmetto Bluff Road. That project, with an estimated cost of \$466,000 for design and construction for its first phase, would help about 279 acres of the watershed.

As we've said, restoring the river to good health won't be cheap, and it won't happen quickly. Town manager Anthony Barrett warned that results from these projects might not be seen for two or three years. The oyster beds won't be reopened to harvesting until state regulators see a three-year trend in improved water quality.

While we applaud specific projects getting under way after seemingly endless years of study, we'd like to see more public discussion about another very important part of restoring the river to

good health -- reducing and redirecting construction under already approved plans, as well as new development plans.

More than 19,000 housing units have been permitted but not yet built in the May River watershed.

Town officials have long acknowledged the impact of hard surfaces -- rooftops, roads, parking lots, driveways -- on sensitive estuarine systems, such as the May River. When the ratio of hard surfaces reaches 10 percent, these waterways degrade.

That precept was at the heart of a push by Fred Holland, retired director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Hollings Marine Laboratory, and the Coastal Conservation League to include the transfer of development rights in the plan to help the river.

To the town's credit, that was done. Now we need to see some action on that front. If it's happening in private discussions with developers, let the rest of us know what's going on.

In addition, a voluntary program to transfer development rights will only go so far. Town and county officials also must be ready to purchase key parcels. And they must be willing to reopen the development agreements that include these thousands of planned but not yet built units and make the changes needed to protect local waterways.

We look forward to reports on specific steps being taken to get this work done.