

Public should know what it takes to protect river

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At first blush, the recent announcement about the hiring of a firm to help educate the public on ways to protect the May River from pollution seems unnecessary.

More than a decade of Bluffton proclaiming its No. 1 goal to be protecting the May River and the many lamentations over closed oyster beds in the once pristine waterway ought to have gotten the message across.

But apparently there's more to do. And the town has hired Water Words That Work for \$40,000 to educate septic-tank owners and pet owners about the role they can play in keeping the river clean. The money comes from a grant through the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control.

Picking up pet waste and pumping out or fixing failing septic tanks could make a difference, but the more important aspect of an education campaign like this is to get people to push public officials to do the heavy lifting necessary to repair the damage already done to the river and to prevent additional damage.

In other words, people need to stiffen the collective spine of elected officials to reopen development agreements, fix or replace stormwater systems that aren't doing the job and change development patterns that have resulted in four miles of the river closed completely to shellfish harvesting, something Bluffton officials promised would not happen when they began annexing tens of thousands of acres and approving the plans for sprawling development.

We have to be smarter about where and how much new development is allowed in the watershed. We also must insist that past mistakes get corrected. And we must be ready to pay for it.

That's particularly important in this economic climate, when even the smallest new business can be seen as a godsend to the tax base. The pressure to say yes to every development request or to turn a blind eye to already approved development that will hurt and not help the cause of protecting the river must be countered with a strong public push to hold officials accountable.

More important to the river's cause than the public education campaign will be work done by another consulting firm and the team working with it. Atlanta-based MacTec Engineering and Consulting has been hired for \$69,000 to complete a strategy to bring the river back to health. The firm's team includes the national nonprofit research and education organization Center for Watershed Protection

and the engineering firms Thomas & Hutton and Ward Edwards. The latter two give us some pause since they have done engineering work in this area. That could be an advantage, or it could be a disadvantage if expensive, corrective action is called for on projects they had a hand in. We need an honest, hard-nosed assessment of what needs to be done.

The team is to build on town staff's work, which includes mapping how stormwater and pollutants flow through the watershed, cataloguing development and its drainage patterns and coming up with short- and long-term goals.

A draft report is due in March.

So pick up after your pet, check your septic tank, install a rain barrel and rain garden, but more importantly, tell town officials you expect to see action and you expect them to keep their promise.