

Bluffton wants formal agreement with county on protecting the May River

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Bluffton Town Council wants more than a handshake from Beaufort County when it comes to protecting the May River. At the recommendation of the May River Waterbody Management Plan Implementation Committee, council voted Tuesday to create an intergovernmental agreement with the county. The document would require both bodies to work jointly in addressing river issues. The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control has restricted shellfishing in the river's headwaters, beginning in September, because of high bacteria levels.

Mayor Lisa Sulka said the agreement would help the public see the two bodies are formally working together to fix the river. "There's a perceived conflict because there's no agreement," she said at the meeting. She then asked what action steps town staff was taking to improve the river. Milt Rhodes, project manager for the May River Watershed Action Plan, said town and county staffs met with the Beaufort-Jasper Water & Sewer Authority for six hours Tuesday to begin developing the plan's specifics. He told council a project outline and cost estimates should be available in the next few weeks. The committee also suggested council adopt the May recommendation of Dr. Chris Marsh of the Lowcountry Institute to re-write the town's stormwater ordinance to require runoff not exceed pre-development levels. Council member Charlie Wetmore said he thought the town's ordinance already required that, and asked staff to bring the existing ordinance and the suggested revisions to the next meeting. Dr. Fred Holland, a retired ecologist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, spoke to council Tuesday night about the danger runoff poses to local waters. When impervious surfaces, such as roads, rooftops and parking lots, cover more than 10 percent of a watershed, Holland said shellfishing will no longer be an option. "You can't create the habitat once it's gone," he said. "You can bring it back to something different, and maybe it'll be better, but you can't get back what you lose."

To better understand changes in the river, the committee suggested council pay for an \$81,936 tidal study that would require nearly \$40,000 a year in equipment operation and maintenance. Council asked staff to find a way to pay for it and see if the county would be willing to contribute to the costs.