

Results from Bluffton clean-water marketing campaigns expected soon

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Through postcards, radio spots, focus groups and social media, two Bluffton marketing campaigns have urged area residents to pick up after their pets and get their septic systems inspected.

Now that the campaigns have ended, a town consultant is evaluating whether the "Neighbors for Clean Water: Our Rivers, Our Responsibility" effort, which started this summer, worked.

If the interest in free septic-tank inspections and repairs promoted in the town's latest marketing is any indication, Bluffton's neighbors may better understand how faulty systems affect the May River -- and their wallets.

About 30 people living on properties within the watershed have applied for free assistance to repair or pump out septic tanks, and the town fields more inquiries every day, according to natural resources manager Kim Jones.

The campaigns, consultant and repairs were paid for with part of a \$1 million S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control grant that funds a variety of river-cleanup projects.

The grant includes an educational component to teach residents how to protect waterways and requires tracking of results to see whether attitudes have changed.

Faulty septic systems could be a contributor to pollution that caused shellfish harvesting to be limited in the river. They also are costly to fix.

Based on Beaufort-Jasper Water & Sewer Authority billing data, about 1,160 parcels in the watershed use septic tanks instead of the sewer. A 10 percent failure rate could mean 31,320 pounds of human waste entering the May River each year, Jones said.

The estimate for pet waste entering the river if a quarter of owners don't pick up after their dogs is much higher: About 290,000 pounds in Bluffton alone, and as much as 110 tons in the watershed.

The target audience for the pet-waste marketing effort was about 1,500 people; the campaign for septic tank owners was aimed at about 300 people.

Water Words That Work, a Virginia company that developed the campaigns, hosted a final focus group in late October to determine if the effort had an effect.

Twelve residents who were paid \$40 for their time told the consultants where they saw the campaign images and what action they took -- for example, signing a pledge to scoop the poop, applying for septic assistance or passing the message to others

Company founder Eric Eckl said he is working on the final report and declined to comment on it. Jones said the results should be received and posted on the town's website within 30 days.

Bluffton resident Julian Friedman thinks the town has done an "exemplary" job of bringing the cleanup to the attention of residents.

Old town resident Allen Ward said tangible reminders of human causes of pollution to the river -- a postcard, a flyer, the rain barrel he keeps in his yard -- prompt more personal responsibility.

"I think those visual reminders inspire us to think about other ways to do things better," Ward said.