

Bluffton adopts May River action plan

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Bluffton Town Council members applauded loudly Wednesday after unanimously adopting a plan to restore the once-pristine May River.

The May River Watershed Action Plan, prepared by town staff and consultants, suggests a laundry list of projects, policies and potential ways to pay for it all.

But one town councilman wondered how the plan will transform from a stack of paper into results -- and how much it will cost.

"(There are) a lot of things in there that are guidelines, suggestions, things we could do, things we could try," councilman Mike Raymond said. "How are you going to prioritize these suggested paths forward?"

Town staff will soon begin bringing suggestions outlined in the plan to council for approval and funding, according to stormwater director Ron Bullman.

The action plan underwent months of public review. It was chiefly criticized by residents and experts for focusing too much on restoration of shellfish harvesting to a four-mile stretch of the river, instead of deterring harmful development.

The plan's final version addresses those concerns by recommending a transfer of development rights program, which discourages building in the sensitive watershed through incentives.

The change earned praise from Reed Armstrong of the Coastal Conservation League, who offered the organization's support in making the program effective.

"(The plan) now addresses the needed element of prevention," Armstrong said Wednesday.

The plan's engineering-based solutions, however, are also an important element, Bullman said.

"If we stop development today, we still have a problem," he said.

The plan's recommendations range from digging retention ponds to encouraging sewer lines instead of septic systems.

It identifies "hot spots" of high fecal coliform levels and suggests pilot projects nearby.

Some of the actions are already in play with a \$1-million grant to clean up the river from the state Department of Health and Environmental Control. Among those efforts are a public awareness campaign.

Five or six of the projects will kick off the formal adoption of the plan, Bullman said.

Staff will also provide updates to council on the plan's progress and successes, he said.