

## Bluffton News

# County drafts step 3 for river cleanups

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Plan would restore water quality in polluted areas.

BEAUFORT — The third and most contentious phase of stormwater volume regulation has been initiated.

A five-year plan to restore water quality in polluted creeks and rivers was presented Wednesday to the Beaufort County Stormwater Management Utility Board.

“We’re finished with step two; this is moving on to step three,” said county Stormwater Manager Dan Ahern.

“This is just a draft, drawing on all the information that we’ve got to date,” Ahern told the board.

Considered the most difficult aspect of regulating the total volume of runoff allowed to enter local waterways, the third phase would involve either retrofitting existing developments or implementing lot standards for individual homes.

“The focus now will be on water quality retrofits to restore impaired waters and will generally be approached on a watershed basis. The town of Bluffton has taken the lead on the May River and this plan will focus on the county’s other impaired watersheds,” according to the draft document.

The Beaufort County Council already has passed Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance amendments to regulate stormwater from new developments and unimproved “lots of record,” those which have been subdivided but not yet improved, outside municipalities.

The stormwater management regulations are based on scientific studies showing that the total volume of runoff is a factor in water pollution even if the runoff itself isn’t polluted.

The scientific findings indicate that too much fresh water dilutes a saltwater creek or river to the point that the salinity no longer kills fecal coliform bacteria.

“The most prominent issue is shellfish beds and fecal coliform,” Ahern said.

Two watersheds – the Okatie River and Battery Creek – have been declared impaired for shellfish harvesting by the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control.

“Stormwater is clearly linked to this impairment,” Ahern said.

The county’s stormwater management plan links impairments to areas developed before water quality controls were adopted.

Three areas in the Battery Creek watershed and two in the Okatie River watershed were identified as priorities.

The plan notes the town of Bluffton has already taken the lead on restoring water quality in the May River, in which the state has closed shellfish harvested in the headwaters due to high fecal coliform readings.

“Restoring impaired watersheds is considered a public cost as opposed to new development and redevelopment, which is expected to install the current level of protection,” the draft document states.

“We don’t expect another ordinance change. All the requirements are already there,” Ahern said.

“We expect people to do what they were originally required to do, and if we need to do more we’ll use incentives,” he said. “There’s a lot of things to look into.”

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