

May River action plan scrutinized

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A Bluffton war plan to clean up the May River focuses too much on restoration and not enough at preventing further pollution, a coastal-development expert said Tuesday.

Fred Holland, retired director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Hollings Marine Laboratory, said the town needs to determine where future development can go as well as fix its current run-off problems. He delivered his comments via conference call to a town committee vetting the May River Action Plan.

"Unfortunately, this is mainly engineering solutions," Holland said of the plan to members of the Water Quality Technical Advisory Committee. "We haven't got pollution avoidance or prevention."

The plan, still in the draft stages, includes years of water-quality study and recommends short- and long-term fixes. Its priorities include addressing septic systems, wildlife and stormwater run-off, and it first targets areas of high fecal coliform that closed oyster harvesting along a four-mile stretch.

Some of the solutions -- such as an awareness campaign to encourage dog owners to pick up after their pets and a program to fix failing septic tanks for free -- are under way with a \$1 million grant from the Department of Health and Environmental Control. The grant also is paying for an overhaul of the town's zoning and development standards, which aims to use incentives and ordinances to keep development out of the watershed.

However, the DHEC grant doesn't come close to paying for all the recommended solutions, the action plan states. One of the few cost estimates in the report is \$4.25 million for several retention ponds and ditches that will handle polluted stormwater.

Committee members reviewed the document to add ideas for funding, partnerships and public awareness.

Committee chairman Geoff Scott agreed with Holland, who has long warned town and county officials that pavement, development and urban sprawl degrade local waters.

Bluffton has not reached the 10 percent of hard surfaces that Holland says triggers water degradation, but about 19,000 planned and approved lots could increase fecal coliform by 1,200 percent, the Coastal Conservation League's Andrea Malloy said at the meeting.

Malloy encouraged the town to investigate development rights transfers and conservation easements.

"(The plan) addresses what's there right now, not what's coming," she said. "Restoration and prevention need to go hand-in-hand."

The plan, drafted with the help of Atlanta-based MacTec Engineering and Consulting Inc., will be reviewed further at an implementation committee today. A public hearing will be held before the plan is submitted to the town's Planning Commission on Sept. 28.

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