

May River panel wants cleanup answers, budget to restore oystering

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Members of a citizens' panel charged with implementing a May River management plan are pushing Bluffton administrators for clearer direction on a cleanup strategy and cost.

In a recent regrouping session, the May River Waterbody Management Plan Implementation Committee panel took stock of accomplishments and where to head next.

High on its list is a renewed interest in developing a boating management plan, one of several priorities yet to be accomplished in an 11-point list recommended in the May River Management Plan, which Town Council adopted in 2008 after a long study.

But members at the Dec. 14 meeting at Town Hall spent the most time talking about the May River Watershed Action Plan, which the council adopted Nov. 9, and how to accomplish its recommendations for restoring the river's headwaters for safe oyster harvesting.

Officials have attributed the headwaters' quality downgrade, measured by fecal coliform counts exceeding federal safety standards for oyster consumption in recent years, to Bluffton's rapid development. Responses have included revamped town and county stormwater management ordinances.

Several members of the panel said the town needs to get a budget estimate to get serious, know what it faces and get the funding from taxpayers — possibly by referendum — or other sources.

Member Allen Ward, a civil engineer, pressed for an estimate of how many millions of dollars it would cost to get oyster beds reopened. "Until we have a number, I think really think we're spinning our wheels," he said. "The voters are going to have to step up and see if they want to fund it."

Ron Bullman, town Stormwater Division manager, said the intent of upcoming pilot projects was to "get something on the ground," see if they work, and then "go after big federal dollars."

But Ward said more staffing and faster spending might be needed. "I'm just concerned development's going to come back real fast, and we're going to lose that window (of opportunity)."

Member Jimmy McIntire said budgeting also needs to include buying property, or development density rights, in sensitive areas or transferring prospective development away from the watershed. He said that would require reopening development agreements and negotiating with developers.

Based on advice from environmental scientists, "If we don't move density to the appropriate places, then it's all a moot point," McIntire said.

"I agree," Ward said. "But how can you even negotiate with developers if you don't know what the price tag is?"

Bullman said he would caution members that the action plan does not say a cleanup "will take X-number of pounds per year of contaminants that you need to pull out. It may be \$100 million. I just don't know what it is."

RIVER PANEL'S COURSE

The panel chaired by attorney Wes Jones, a leader of the former state Coastal Council, was created by the Town Council to help follow through on river management recommendations, or priorities, made by its predecessor group in June 2008.

The first committee drafted management plan priorities that a state environmental adviser said would “identify and address competing uses of the water.” But it wasn’t handed a shocker like its successor, the implementation panel: An official warning of threatened closures of oyster beds to harvesting.

The implementation committee’s inaugural meeting, on Jan. 14, 2009, came with an announcement by Jeff McNesby, then director of the since reconfigured Environmental Protection Department, that town officials had “declared war” on rising fecal coliform levels that threatened to close roughly the upper third of the May River, or its headwaters.

The implementation committee took on an advisory role for that project, as well, leaving some other management points for later.

McNesby’s warning became a prognostication. Later in 2009, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control slapped a “conditional” label on harvesting in the previously unrestricted headwaters. That banned harvesting except in optimal conditions in about a 900-acre headwaters area — a four-mile stretch with beds leased by the Bluffton Oyster Co. The change was triggered by fecal coliform levels, over a three-year cycle of samples, exceeding federal safety standards for human consumption of oysters, DHEC said.

Then, in 2010, DHEC saw no improvements in the rolling, three-year average and reclassified the headwaters area to “restricted,” which shut down harvesting. The Bluffton Oyster Co. continues to harvest from downstream beds rated unrestricted.

Throughout this process, the implementation committee became a cheerleader for the war plan. The panel helped steer a grant-funded effort for the rebranded “action plan” to lay a cleanup path. The plan, by staff and a consulting team hired for \$69,400, was completed in October. Staff is beginning to work on its recommendations, including pilot stormwater engineering projects.

A proposed pilot budget involving a settling pond near the headwaters is just over \$400,000, Bullman said.

FRUSTRATION EXPRESSED

Jones said building a budget requires knowing what you’re going to build. “I’ve reached kind of a level of frustration ... These meetings are helpful because they remind us things are happening. (But) I guess I’d just like to see the process speeded up.

“It seems to me we need more dedicated personnel to do this.”

The Stormwater Division of the Engineering Department has four employees.

Bullman said to get moving, “we just piled everything on the table in the action plan.” He said staff is working on the numbers.

“Nothing in there is engineered,” Bullman said. “It doesn’t say, “Go take the (building) density out of there and put it over here.”

The document includes many initiatives, he added. “We worked hard on it, but it’s not a plan that’s going to be implemented in a year,” which is why it’s called “a living document,” Bullman said.

“I don’t think anyone ever thought we were going to get the river fixed in 2012.”

CHARTING FUTURE

Bullman said the Stormwater Division will bring a “short list” of projects “that we can handle” to the council at its Jan. 10 meeting.

He said the town is breaking environmental ground “that is new to everybody. Some of the projects are going to be trial and error.”

Also, Bullman said, “I will submit to you that we’ve really had this action plan just over a month. We haven’t even gotten to the tip of the iceberg.”

For its next meeting at 2 p.m. Feb. 22 at Town Hall, the committee tasked staff to offer a proposed budget, or ranges — even if suspect — and timelines, “and get our hands around if this is a \$100 million or \$200 million problem,” Jones said.

Also, by Jones’ summary, the panel wants to know what the staff is doing and if more help is needed, and if the committee should take on a new role or disband.

“We’ve got the action plan. Where do we go from here?” he said.

PANEL MEMBERS

Committee members in attendance Dec. 14 included Chairman Wes Jones, S.C. OCRM liaison Curtis Joyner, Jacob Martin, Jimmy McIntire, Bob Millikan, Joe Pitts, Don Smith and Allen Ward. Those absent included Chris Marsh, Hank Johnston, Josh Tiller and Alan Warren.