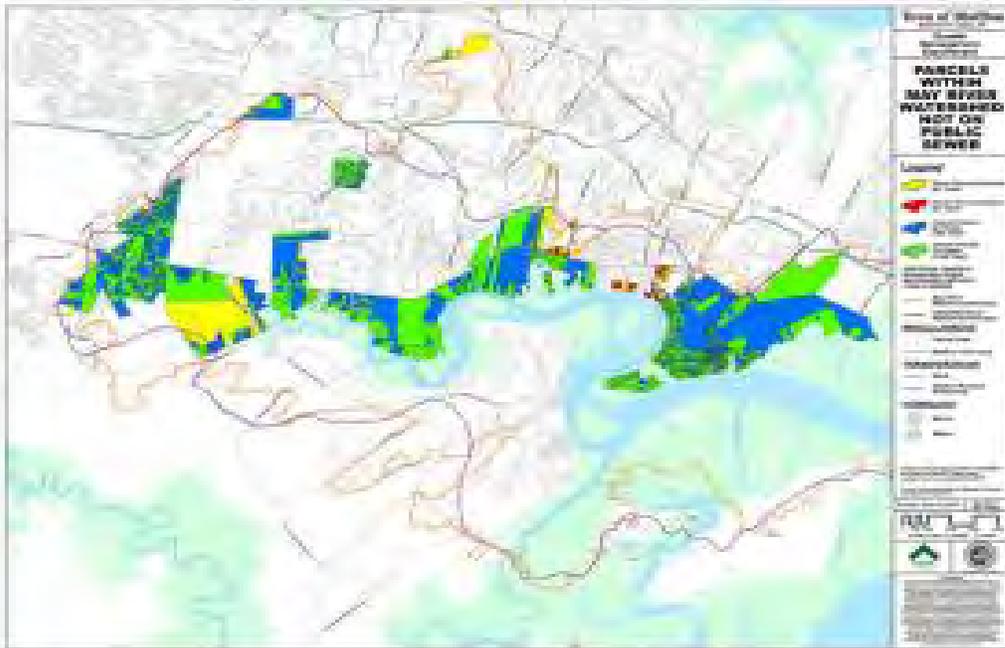


May River program offers free septic system repairs

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Courtesy of the town of Bluffton This map color codes parcels in the May River watershed based on whether they have sewer service, septic systems or are undeveloped. It is based upon billing data from Beaufort Jasper Water & Sewer Authority and assumes that if BJWSA provides a water bill with no sewer charge, that parcel must be serviced by septic. Areas se areas denoted as "Parcels No Sewer" on the legend have no sewer bill and also have no structure on them. Areas denoted as "Parcels on Septic" are those which have no sewer bill but do have a structure on them.

The town of Bluffton has launched an all-out drive to promote its septic systems inspection and repair program as part of May River cleanup efforts.

The carrot — it's at no cost to recipients and with a promise of no penalties for owners of systems spewing waste that could wash into the May River and ruin oyster beds for harvest.

The Neighbors for Clean Water initiative will cover the costs to inspect, maintain, and repair home septic systems on properties that drain into the May River.

"If your septic system needs repairs, we're offering a helping hand," said Kim Jones, town natural resources manager. "If you're not sure about the condition of your system, let us help you find out."

Poorly maintained septic systems are one source of the fecal coliform bacteria that is causing health and safety concerns along the May River and state closure of the oyster beds in the headwaters to harvesting.

The town estimates there are about 1,000 homes with septic systems that drain to the May River, any one of which could be a silent and invisible contributor to water pollution problems, according to Jones.

Under the program, homeowners determine if their home is within the boundaries of the May River watershed, and submit a completed form and waiver to the town. Then the town will make all of the arrangements.

Regardless of income, there is no cost to those who qualify.

Some ballpark costs associated with septic system maintenance include:

- Professional inspection: \$150 to \$500
- Pump-out: \$250 to \$400
- Repair: \$800 to \$3,000
- Replacement: \$3,000 and up

"There are no fines or penalties for needing repairs to your system," Jones said. "If you want to be a responsible neighbor, we want to make it easier for you to afford to do that."

To sign up or get more information, call the town of Bluffton at 706-4500 and ask about septic assistance. Or, on the Internet, go to www.neighborsforcleanwater.org/p/septic-assistance.html

The initiative combines two septic system maintenance assistance programs — the Neighbors for Clean Water Septic System Maintenance initiative and the Neighborhood Assistance Program. The Neighbors for Clean Water Septic System Maintenance initiative is funded by a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 319 Grant through the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control and is intended to reduce a potential source of fecal coliform in the May River, Jones said.

From the grant, funds total \$34,500 and the only qualification for receiving grant assistance is that the residence must be located in the May River watershed.

The Neighborhood Assistance Program has a \$10,000 budget in the town's general fund. "This assistance is available to only Town of Bluffton residents regardless of whether they live within the May River watershed or not," Jones said.

Both programs are being heavily promoted this month as part of a social marketing campaign. Assistance will continue to be available until the grant funds are expended.

"Prior to this initiative being promoted, six residences within the May River watershed have received grant services totaling slightly over \$2,500 over the past year," Jones said.

The promotion includes an email campaign by Mayor Lisa Sulka that explains the program to prospects.

Her email this week begins, "Does your home have a septic system? Are you putting off maintenance of your system because of the cost of pumping or repairs?"

If you answered yes to those questions, then maybe we can help. And if someone you know would answer yes to these questions, maybe we can help them, too."

After going over details, the mayor writes: "We will not fine you or penalize you in any way for having a septic system that needs repair! You have nothing to lose — and a safer yard and cleaner river to gain — if you reach out for a helping hand."

LEARN MORE

For more information, visit www.neighborsforcleanwater.org/p/septic-assistance.html or call the Bluffton Office of Community Development at 706-4500.

ABOUT NEIGHBORS FOR CLEAN WATER

The Neighbors for Clean Water initiative is a project of the town of Bluffton, with cooperation from Beaufort County. "Our goal is to educate and motivate residents to be responsible and do their part to clean up the May River. In our first year of effort, we will focus on encouraging our neighbors to reduce the amount fecal coliform bacteria in the river from pet waste and poorly maintained septic systems," a town overview said.

This program is made possible by a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant awarded by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.