

## Restoration of May River proceeds

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Steps to restore the May River to good health must be married with tactics to direct growth away from critical areas of the watershed, members of a Bluffton committee said Wednesday.

The May River Action Plan implementation committee endorsed adding transfer-of-development-rights measures to the plan after questioning coastal-development expert Fred Holland, who has been advising the town on the cleanup effort.

Holland, retired director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Hollings Marine Laboratory, told committee members that transfers of development rights could drastically reduce future pollution, save the town money and benefit developers.

The program aims to shift development on some of the 19,000 lots in the May River watershed that have been permitted but not yet built on -- many in the headwater areas of Stoney and Rose Dhu creeks -- to sites where new construction would do less harm to the river.

The state has closed the upper half of the river fed largely by the Rose Dhu and Stoney subwatersheds to shellfish harvesting based on fecal coliform measurements. Fecal coliform levels are an indicator of pollution in the river.

If those lots are built on, Holland has estimated fecal coliform loading could increase by 1,200 percent.

"I don't know if you can afford to engineer your way out of that," Holland said. "Especially with \$2 million (stormwater) ponds outlined in this plan ... which I don't believe will work."

Endorsed by the Coastal Conservation League, transfers of development rights would allow developers to sell the rights to build on the property. That would allow future growth to be concentrated in high-density areas, while preserving open space elsewhere.

Committee member Alan Ward said he agreed with the idea but questioned how it could "make sense in the business world."

Holland described several scenarios where it might work. For example, he said, a developer of property in foreclosure could sell the rights for cash. Or perhaps, it would make more economic sense for a company to build where roads and sewer and water lines already exist.

In 2007, the town adopted an ordinance allowing for the transfer of development rights, but it is rarely used, said Ron Bullman, town stormwater manager.

Negotiating the transfers would be on a case-by-case basis, said Andrea Malloy of the Coastal Conservation League.

Committee chairman Wes Jones said the town could add incentives, and the program shouldn't be mandatory.

"Without having (a rights-transfer program) in there, we're leaving out a critical component," Jones said.

Kim Jones, the town's natural resources manager, said a zoning and development overhaul soon to be completed might help flesh out the program. For example, the overhaul would include incentives and ordinances to encourage growth away from the sensitive areas.

Reached after the meeting, developer John Reed said transfers of development rights would have to be "fair for those already in play."

Reed, who has developed five communities in Bluffton, said it could protect the river from pollution, or it could potentially overdevelop high-density areas.

"If that's what was needed in that area anyway, why wouldn't good planning have already approved that?" he said.