

Time to target the root of May River's pollution

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Bluffton needs to quit playing with Band-Aids and reach for the tourniquet.

For years, town leaders have studied and tested the damage that widespread and fast-paced development has done to the May River, Bluffton's crown jewel.

Last week, a well-respected expert on stormwater pollution told a town committee that nibbling at the problem with after-the-fact Band-Aids isn't going to be enough to avoid the community's greatest fear -- the ruin of the May River.

Dr. Fred Holland said, in essence, that the town needs to turn off the spigot.

He said that new stormwater-retention ponds and retrofitting existing systems and ordinances is not going to be enough to preserve the river.

A more effective, quicker, and probably cheaper way to reduce pollutants in the river, he said, is to reduce new construction in the most vulnerable areas of the May River watershed. He showed that reducing impervious surfaces -- rooftops, driveways, roads and parking lots -- in certain areas that feed into the Rose Dhu Creek and Stoney Creek "sub-watersheds" is the soundest way to protect the May River. Those hard surfaces are directly linked to the increase in pollutants and the increased volume of stormwater pouring into the May River.

More than 19,000 housing units have been permitted but not yet built in the May River watershed. "When these units are constructed," Holland's draft report states, "less than 1 percent of the Stoney Creek and Rose Dhu Creek sub-watersheds will be forested, and impervious cover levels will have increased to 14 percent for the Stoney Creek sub-watershed and 20 percent for the Rose Dhu Creek sub-watershed." Waterways are impaired at 10 percent.

Holland endorsed a tool that would use a tourniquet instead of a Band-Aid. It would alter construction patterns by offering the transfer of development rights from critical areas of the watershed to places nearby where it would do less damage.

To its credit, the May River Action Plan implementation committee endorsed adding transfer-of-development-rights measures to the plan after hearing from Holland last week.

This is not the only tactic that must be used, but it is, as the Holland report says, "an easy way to take a 'giant step' toward improving May River water quality."

Bluffton must change. The town has approved too much development in the wrong places to keep the May River healthy.

This proposal gets to the root of the problem. And it is starkly clear about what's at stake.

"If these increases in stormwater runoff and associated pollution ... are allowed to occur," Holland's report states, "we project that radical, adverse changes in the water quality, seafood production and human uses of the May River will occur, including widespread closures of shellfishing grounds, posting of water-contact swimming advisories at known swimming locations, and reduced human uses, including commerce and recreation."

A Band-Aid won't cure that sickness.