

Bluffton Today, 04-03-2011

Town leaders commit to may river restoration

Strategy session also highlights economic growth and road issues.

BY FRANK MORRIS
BLUFFTON TODAY

The Bluffton Town Council is ready to do “the heavy lifting” needed to restore the May River by implementing May River Action Plan recommendations, members said Saturday. That was the consensus of Mayor Lisa Sulka, Mayor Pro Tem Fred Hamilton Jr. and council members Oliver Brown, Allyne Mitchell and Mike Raymond at a strategic planning workshop on Saturday.

Other discussion highlights included agreement to keep working for environmentally friendly economic development. Officials also talked about needing to reexamine road planning and access issues with Beaufort County and the state, the entities owning most of Bluffton-area public roads, to head off congestion problems when development kicks up again.

In public discussion, retired businessman Jimmy McIntire — who lives on the May River outside town and is active on the town’s May River Management Plan Implementation Committee—told the council upcoming release of the proposed May River Action Plan will test its political and leadership skills.

“You’re going to have some heavy lifting to do ... to fix what we’ve broken,” by carrying out the recommendations, McIntire said. Town officials began working on a May River Action Plan in 2009 after the state Department of Health and Environmental Control warned that fecal coliform levels in the May River headwaters threatened possible shellfishing closures. Regulators ended up closing oystering in the uppermost headwaters and setting restrictions, effective with the Oct. 1, 2009, shellfishing season start, in a downstream area.

Last August, DHEC went a step further and closed all oystering in a four-mile stretch of the Bluffton Oyster Co.’s leased beds in the May River. The company continues to harvest from unrestricted beds downstream from the closed area. Last November, town leaders announced hiring of a consulting team for \$69,400 to draft a formal “action plan” to clean up and protect the river from fecal coliform contamination carried by stormwater runoff. Town officials have said a draft should be ready for review soon.

It originally was expected to be ready for review by Feb. 18. McIntire said it will be important to follow project and other recommendations, because Bluffton’s attractiveness and tax base will suffer “once we lose the estuaries.” He asked why anyone would spend \$1 million to live in Palmetto Bluff if “they can’t eat an oyster out of (the river) or can’t swim in it or can’t fish in it?”

Raymond said the town has done a lot already to address the issue, “and I believe we’re getting smarter and smarter and moving close and closer to ... solutions.” Sulka said, “There are going to be choices we’ll have to make that are going to be hard, but I think it’s worth it. ... I don’t want to be reactive; I want to be proactive.” Hamilton said McIntire’s “love for the river and love for Bluffton” has kept him on point. “When the heavy lifting comes, I’ve got my muscles with me. I’ll lift,” Hamilton said. Mitchell said, “we have to stay on target” and do what’s needed.

Brown, speaking more generally, said that with citizens’ help, “we can do whatever we need to do If it’s dear to our heart, we pay for it. If it’s dear to our heart, we take a stand and do whatever it takes to get it accomplished.” The 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. session was in a conference room at the new Law Enforcement Center on Progressive Street in Buckwalter Place and marked its first event. Police will move in Thursday.

The session took place to update the strategic planning fashioned at the Jan 22 and Jan. 23, 2010, Bluffton Leadership Retreat at the Inn at Palmetto Bluff. In transportation discussions, Raymond said

he's especially concerned about Bluffton Parkway, which will get a projected 10,000 more cars a day when the 5A extension opens between Burnt Church Road and the U.S. 278 intersection with Buckingham Plantation Drive across from Moss Creek. He and others said planning for the future intersection of the Bluffton Parkway and the 5B link between Buck Island Road and Buckwalter Parkway is critical.

Town officials have proposed the county relocate and reconfigure the proposed parkways intersection for the link, which would replace the Bluffton Parkway dogleg and end sharing of a stretch of Buckwalter Parkway. Sulka said town officials need to review road access plans and connectivity issues with county officials. Mitchell said mass transit should be looked at.

Chicago-to-Bluffton area transplant Susan Harper, a business psychologist and president of Synergy Consulting LLC, facilitated the workshop. She had met before it individually with the town's elected officials, Town Manager Anthony Barrett and department heads to gather information and survey their priorities. Up to 10 private citizens attended at least part of the meeting, including town residents, a Sun City man and a woman from the Edgefield subdivision outside town limits. For the wrap-up, Sulka asked every person – including staff members and private citizens – in the audience who had not spoken to introduce themselves and make a comment.

Editor's note: Go to www.blufftontoday.com to see the longer, uncut version of this story.

On the net

There's a lot to find on the town of Bluffton's website at www.townofbluffton.sc.gov, including a copy of the town strategic plan adopted last year. Click "governing" in the left rail on the home page. That will send you to the Town Council page and, to the right, the "Strategic Plan" link. It's a 24-page summary including vision and mission statements, core beliefs, five-year goals, and 2010 and future projects.