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Bluffton must act if plan is to have real meaning

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Bluffton Town Council members applauded their vote for a May River watershed "action plan."

The real applause will come if the town accomplishes its goal of restoring the river's water quality and preventing any more degradation.

The May River Watershed Action Plan is a result of a lot of hard work, but it is only a relatively small first step in what comes next. Fixing existing stormwater systems, building new systems to better handle polluting runoff and making sure new development is planned for areas where it will have less impact on the river.

Town staff is to come up with a list of projects and their price tags. The council should be ready to spend money. Restoring the river won't come cheap.

That's just one of the reasons town officials must get developers on board with the idea of transferring development rights to areas where new construction will do less harm. If they don't get the cooperation they need to get the job done, they must look for other ways to make it happen. That includes reopening development agreements to adjust the terms to take into account changing circumstances and the knowledge and experience gained in the decade since those agreements were first negotiated.

The town also should get behind two Beaufort County initiatives -- stricter building requirements for individual lots that have been approved but not built on and the county's land-buying program.

The county this year adopted stricter controls for about 22,000 "lots of record" in unincorporated Beaufort County. If a community's stormwater system doesn't meet new, stricter runoff standards, it would fall to lot owners to reduce their individual impact when they build. Examples of how that can be done include unpaved driveways and walkways and smaller roof surfaces.

If this tactic is to have a meaningful impact in the May River watershed, Bluffton must join the county. About 19,000 housing units are approved for the May River watershed. Town officials have indicated they want to try other ways to improve the river's health before doing this. But they shouldn't wait. It won't hurt other efforts, and it certainly could help. Enforcement could be handled through the building permit process. Difficulty in enforcing should not be an excuse for inaction. If officials can't figure out how to say "no," then they need to stop saying "yes" to new construction.

In 2012, the county will ask voters to approve its borrowing \$20 million for its land-buying program. Bluffton officials should get behind this. The town has benefited already from the program. Purchases include the Bluffton Oyster Factory Park and the 10-acre wetlands parcel in the Bluffton Park community. The county also has protected nearly 1,200 acres in the May, Okatie and New River areas, as well as more than 880 acres of Ulmer family property between Bluffton and the bridges to Hilton Head Island.

A key tool for officials in working to reduce or redistribute where new homes and commercial centers are built will be the ability to buy land or development rights in environmentally sensitive and strategic areas. Bluffton can't afford to pass up any opportunity to restore the river and keep its promise to the community.