

At Bluffton forum, saving the May River tops priority list

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Discussing the importance of the May River Saturday at Bluffton's annual Strategic Planning Citizen Forum, town building inspections director Frank Hodge offered this comparison: "What the May River is to Bluffton is the same as what beaches are to Hilton Head," he said.

In other words, he explained, the river is the town's principal calling card, and Bluffton must do whatever it can to protect it.

Saving and celebrating the May proved the consensus priority among the forum's 50-odd participants.

Suggestions for doing so ranged from acquiring land that could capture stormwater to improving river education in the towns' schools to promoting the waterway at regional restaurants who serve seafood caught from it.

Forum participants were assigned to one of six tables, each manned by an assistant town manager and a town staffer taking notes. The assistant town manager's primary responsibility was facilitating discussion rather than responding directly to resident recommendations.

Those recommendations included:

- Revising the town's large-scale development agreements to reduce the developments' environmental impact
- Better planning and growth management coordination with neighboring jurisdictions
- Beefing up marketing of the town to motorists, especially those on their way to Hilton Head, to make Bluffton more of a must-see destination
- Looking to other communities like Rock Hill for examples of how to manage rapid growth while preserving the town's essential character
- Broadcasting town meetings on television

One other concern voiced by residents was the lack of attendance at town events from residents living in newer subdivisions like Bluffton Village and Woodbridge.

Mayor Lisa Sulka said the town would make more of an effort to reach out to these residents by putting events in the communities' newsletters. She said it was difficult to reach newcomers en masse because many of the developments' property owners associations meet only once a year.

Town manager Anthony Barrett put a different spin on the dilemma, pointing out that throughout history, it is often only an engaged third of the population that influences the outcome of major events.

The results of the forum will be incorporated into the town's strategic planning documents, Barrett said, and a year-end report card will grade each set of goals the town establishes.