

Bluffton's new manager has work cut out for him

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Bluffton's new town manager will need to hit the ground running when he starts in September. There's plenty to do without a single new development project coming online.

Anthony Barrett will be coming to Bluffton from Fredericksburg, Va., where he worked for a large commercial developer in the area for five years. That gives us pause, but he will have a chance to show us what he can do, and Town Council members who hired him say they will call the shots.

But those "shots" to a large extent will be a result of information and guidance the council gets from town staff, particularly the town manager. Barrett will set the workday agenda and priorities for staff, and most importantly, he will advise council members. A part-time council relies a great deal on the full-time staff.

As for priorities, if Barrett wants to carry out the stated will of the council, as well as the people of Bluffton and its immediate surrounds, he should put at the top of his list the town's vaunted "war plan" to restore the May River to its former health.

The plan needs momentum from the top, and it needs funding. Barrett will be in a position as the town's top employee to help make that happen. In addition to advising council and directing staff, he will be in contact with federal, state and county counterparts working on the same problem.

We ask Barrett to remember that he works for the whole town, including people he will never talk to and never hear from, but who are affected greatly by the job he does and how he does it.

It isn't just about developers and their hired hands who frequent Town Hall. The average Joe gets three minutes at a council meeting to say his piece, while developers get hour upon hour of meetings with staff.

Barrett can use his private development experience to help the community at large. That experience can be a positive influence if he makes it so. Town Council should make sure that he does.

Bluffton officials have already approved plenty of development within the town's 50-square-mile borders. What we need now is strict oversight in how the remaining development comes about and immediate fixes to what hasn't worked -- with the promise to "protect the (May) river" upheld, not merely paid lip service.

We also expect a commitment to open government that goes beyond a minimum interpretation of state law. We've made progress on that front in recent months with Bluffton officials, but it came largely in spite of and not because of former town manager Bill Workman.

Barrett said he and his wife were "smitten" with Bluffton when they visited before he was chosen to be the town's fourth manager since 1999, when the town switched its form of government after its first big annexation.

What most people are "smitten" with around here is the natural beauty and laid-back lifestyle that has long defined Bluffton, but that is at great risk today if not already lost.

Barrett shouldn't be fooled by that laid-back approach. Bluffton area residents are fiercely protective of their natural resources, and that starts with the May River.

That should be first and foremost in his mind as he starts his new job. It's first and foremost in the minds of the people he will be working for -- and that goes well beyond the five people who sit on Town Council.