

Bluffton targets ditches, logging road to decrease stormwater in Verdier Cove

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Published Tuesday, August 4, 2009

The town of Bluffton plans to clear drainage ditches and remove an old logging road in an effort to decrease the runoff flowing into Verdier Cove and on to the May River.

Gregg Eckstein, assistant director of the town's environmental protection department, told town council Tuesday night that a request for the proposals has been put out to bid. Once the town selects a company to do the work, the project will take about six to eight weeks to complete. The projects are expected to cost less than \$200,000, officials said.

Erosion in Verdier Cove in downtown Bluffton was identified about two years ago. Town studies have shown runoff draining into the cove has increased 130 percent since Bluffton Park, Red Cedar Place and Hidden Lakes were developed. Town officials have said too much freshwater in the river is changing its salt content and leading to higher bacteria levels.

To redirect the drainage, Eckstein said clogged ditches must be cleared and portions of a 500-foot logging road across a wetland near Bluffton Park must be removed. The road blocks the stormwater flow, causing runoff to drain south toward the May, instead of following its natural path north toward the Colleton River.

Interim town manager Marc Orlando said the work will "make the most immediate impact." He also presented council with recommendations from two May River committees on the "May River Watershed Action Plan," formerly known as the "war plan."

The committees suggest the town:

- develop a memorandum of understanding with Beaufort County to work together to solve water quality issues, update the stormwater ordinance to address volume and better understand salinity changes in the river's headwaters. The committees suggested Bluffton fund an \$81,936 tidal study.

Council member Charlie Wetmore asked that members consider the recommendations at the Aug. 18 meeting since council had only just received the information.

Jimmy McIntire, a member of one of the committees, wasn't pleased with the delay. He said council members don't attend committee meetings often enough. "For you all not to be prepared tells us exactly where you stand."

Mayor Lisa Sulka disagreed and said council receives regular updates from staff members who are "working their butts off" to find ways to improve the river's health.

"If you want face time you can get it, but I think you'd rather see action," she said. " ... We love that river just as much as you do, Mr. McIntire."