

Conservation league shapes plan to save May River

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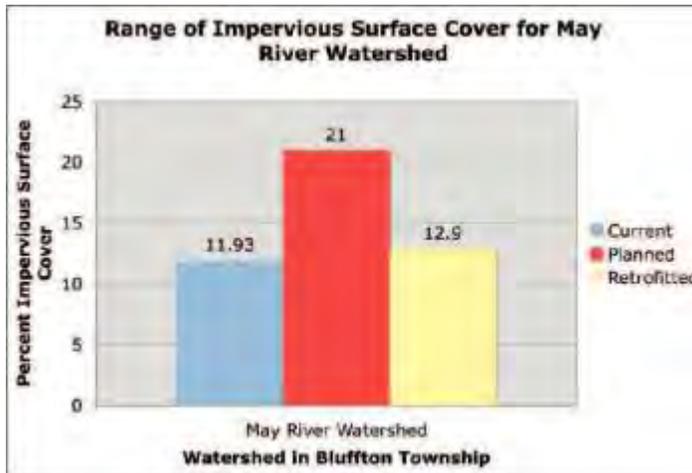


Unveiling set for Monday meeting at Bluffton Library.

The Coastal Conservation League is rolling out a proposal for local governments to "save the May River" by rearranging and concentrating future development in its watershed.

League officials say they'll unveil a "comprehensive watershed plan" at a 6 p.m. Monday meeting open to the public at the Bluffton Library, 120 Palmetto Way, to prevent excessive stormwater runoff from further harming the May River.

Leaders of the nonprofit



Leaders of the nonprofit group will propose changing development patterns to limit hard surfaces — impervious coverage including roofs and pavement — that increase stormwater runoff.

They will advocate striving to keep impervious coverage of land areas as close to 10 percent "as you can humanly get" by concentrating future development into smaller areas than now planned in town limits and unincorporated areas of the watershed, according to Andrea Malloy, manager of the league's South Coast Office in Beaufort.

Too much freshwater runoff into high-salinity estuaries upsets the ecological balance and harms marine life, and that typically happens when impervious coverage exceeds 10 percent, according to Malloy and others, including two experts who addressed the Town Council on Tuesday.

She and Garrett Budds, Coastal Conservation League South Coast Director, said achieving the league's goal would require changing existing development agreements with local governments.

"If the greater Bluffton area develops exactly as is planned under approved development agreements — that's 9 out of every 10 remaining acres in Southern Beaufort County — the watersheds will easily exceed 20 percent impervious cover, guaranteed. That means no more eating May River oysters. Changes must be made. We can still accommodate growth, but we must change the place and manner in which we grow," Budds said in his announcement of Monday's meeting.

"The Coastal Conservation League has developed a solution that would bring Bluffton's total impervious surface cover closer to 10 percent, while still accommodating the same number of housing units," he said.

Malloy said the league's staff, including former Bluffton Town Manager Josh Martin, has been busy calculating impervious coverage estimates for the greater Bluffton area as well as the New River and Okatie River watersheds, based on existing and projected building figures in town and county records.

The league then applied an EPA equation to calculate existing and future impervious coverage estimates.

Its estimate for existing impervious coverage in the May River watershed is 11.9 percent, almost 2 percent above the 10 percent threshold goal.

If existing development plans are carried out, the league estimated impervious coverage will reach 21 percent.

To lower that projection, the league will propose shifting approved housing unit counts from approved developments not yet started to developments in an early phase. "Bluffton already has a vehicle to do this; they already have a transferable development rights bank," she said.

League officials were able to get impervious coverage projections at build out down to 12.9 percent by shifting future housing locations, Malloy said.

"The point of this presentation is just to show it can be done, that there is hope," Malloy said.

"There has been a lot of attention and focus on stormwater engineering, and that is really important, but it's only one piece of it. The land use is the other piece. It doesn't matter how much we engineer, how perfect we make our stormwater systems, if we cover 20 percent of our watershed with hard services, rooftops and roads, we will never be able to eat an oyster out of the May again," she said.

"It's going to take sitting down with developers and coming up with solutions," she said.

Malloy said the league is encouraged that the town is looking at changing zoning and development standards as part of the environmental mix.

A May River management update Tuesday from Jeff McNesby, town environmental protection director, notes that direction.

He and Marc Orlando, assistant town manager for growth management and the interim town manager, said the town is preparing to select a consultant to help revise its Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance. "Among other things, the update will overhaul the (ordinance) including zoning, land-use principals, thoroughfare standards and environmental quality ordinance," a staff memo to the council says. "It is important to note the stormwater ordinance will be updated in

concert with the entire Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance overhaul to include changes that address post-development volume of surface stormwater runoff."

The warm-up act

Malloy said the focus on May River protection and the full house it drew at Tuesday's Town Council meeting "kicked our butt into making this meeting happen on Monday."

At the council meeting, ecologist Fred Holland said that estuary headwaters, which take much longer for tides to flush out than areas close to the mouth, are like the "canary in the coal mine" warning of pollution trouble.

Such a warning came when the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control decided in May to close the May River headwaters to shellfishing for two weeks after each heavy rainfall due to excessive fecal coliform levels, according to Holland, retired head of the S.C. DNR's Marine Resources Research Institute and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration marine lab in Charleston.

Also Tuesday, Al Stokes, manager of the state DNR's Waddell Mariculture Center on the Colleton River, told how infusions of too much freshwater into saltwater estuaries would harm reproduction of shrimp and game fish.

Both town and county officials have recently said they suspect influxes of freshwater into the May River have reduced salt content that kills fecal coliform.

Budds focused on Holland's report in an announcement of Monday's meeting.

"More than 20 years of research on coastal development has shown us that when settlement involves a high percentage of impervious surface there is a significant decline in ecological health and water quality," Budds said.

"Dr. Fred Holland's presentation ... reinforced this message. As Dr. Holland so succinctly put it, 'the amount of hard stuff in a watershed is critical and a good indicator of whether you can eat the shellfish or swim in the water... at 10 percent impervious surface, you are going to be closing oyster beds, you're not going to be eating oysters from there — only a little bit more and it is not safe for swimming.'

"Bluffton's waterways are being impacted by the sprawling development of the last several years. The time has come to make the hard choices that will ultimately shape Bluffton's future. The pressing question for every resident, property owner, and elected official: how badly do we want to save this river and our way of life? If we want to maintain Bluffton's unique heritage and sense of place, its time to bravely move the town in a new direction."

Steps taken

The town and county had launched a "May River War Plan" in January to monitor and find ways to protect river quality, after DHEC warned that high fecal coliform levels in monthly sample tests might force closing shellfish beds to harvesting. Fecal coliform levels are used to indicate when harmful bacteria may be at levels that could make people sick from eating shellfish.

County and town environmental and stormwater control officials have been focused on identifying pollution and excessive runoff sources and determining corrections.

On Tuesday, the Town Council voted to reach an intergovernmental agreement with the Beaufort County Council to create and implement a "May River Watershed Action Plan," which would tackle the main goals of a May River Waterbody Management Plan the council adopted last year.

Members agreed to wait for more information to consider a management committee recommendation, advocated by Lowcountry Institute director Chris Marsh, to require that stormwater volume at outfalls into estuaries not exceed pre-development rates. The Beaufort County Natural Resources Committee has already endorsed a similar plan for County Council adoption.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Coastal Conservation League is a grassroots nonprofit conservation organization, founded in 1989 and backed by more than 4,000 members.

Its mission is to protect the natural environment of the South Carolina coastal plain and to enhance the quality of life of communities by working with individuals, businesses and government to ensure balanced solutions.

Source: www.coastalconservationleague.org

COUNTY LINK

Read Beaufort County Natural Resources Committee meeting minutes, which include extensive discussions on stormwater management, online at www.municode.com/Resources/gateway.asp?pid=30093&sid=40

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