



Keep pushing to protect area's sensitive waterways

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Beaufort County is to be commended for its continuing efforts to prevent further pollution of the troubled Okatie River and restore its water quality.

The county's appeal of a state decision to allow three docks with 30 boat slips at Pinckney Point is the latest in a series of steps to try to prevent more degradation and restore the tidal estuary to its former health. While it is an improvement over the developer's request for seven docks and

70 boat slips, the permit granted is too much for a river we're trying to save. The developer still wants to build those seven docks, all for a 76-lot development that hasn't even been approved yet. The administrative judge hearing the two appeals this week certainly should turn down that request.

And a decision to overturn the state's permitting of the three docks would be the first good news for the Okatie in more than a decade. Each of these docks is one boat slip short of a marina, which would not be allowed in these waters.

The county has spent more than \$7 million to buy property and development rights in the river's headwaters area. It's closely watching development of a massive shopping center across S.C. 170 in Hardeeville. State and federal officials also are working on a study to determine the pollution loads the river can handle and still allow shellfish harvesting. The dock approval sets back that effort and hampers attempts to improve water quality.

One misstep so far has been County Council's approval of intense development along the river at Okatie Village. But we're promised no degradation from that project and state-of-the art stormwater management systems. We'll be watching.

We'll also be watching how the town of Bluffton handles continuing development requests in areas of the river's watershed that it controls. In April, Town Council approved a nearly 180,000-square-foot shopping center near the river's headwaters. Preliminary plans for another project near the headwaters also were submitted to the town. The project's two phases included a convenience store with gas pumps, a 120-room hotel and 250 apartments or town homes, as well as retail, restaurant and office space.

Again we're promised "state-of-the-art" stormwater management systems and "best management practices."

"Best management practices" and the best of intentions so far have failed to protect local waterways. We're promised good stewardship, and we get closed oyster beds.

It will take a collective effort to save our rivers. Beaufort County, Bluffton, Hardeeville, Jasper County and the state all must work together. The county can't do it alone. And it will take some rethinking from government officials and developers about how we do business here, especially near our sensitive estuaries.