

May River protectors laud county regulations

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Oct. 28, 2009

Environmental advocates look beyond new ordinance to future clean-water efforts.

May River advocates already are looking beyond a new stormwater ordinance to “the next step.”

Environmentalists lauded the Beaufort County Council and applauded its unanimous approval of more stringent stormwater regulations Monday.

“I want to thank you... I’m really proud of Beaufort County,” said Brandon Waring of Bluffton.

Waring, Compton Goff and Jimmy McIntire — all longtime Blufftonians — have tirelessly lobbied for stronger water quality protections for the May River.

“I couldn’t be prouder of the leadership the (county) staff has provided,” McIntire said.

The new ordinance specifically restricts “total volume” of stormwater runoff from being channeled into saltwater creeks and rivers.

Bluffton Town Councilman Charlie Wetmore has introduced a companion municipal

ordinance, which has passed first reading. It is scheduled for review by the Bluffton Planning Commission tonight and Wetmore said final reading could be approved by December.

Chris Marsh, director of the Lowcountry Institute at Spring Island, said controlling total volume is not a new concept but is now supported by more scientific evidence than was previously available.

Fred Holland, a stormwater runoff expert with the Environmental Protection Agency, mentioned volume as the “missing element” of best management practices as early as 2000, according to Marsh.

“This is not a new message, it’s not a knee-jerk reaction,” Marsh said.

He said the volume of rainwater, though not pollution per se, has a “cumulative effect” of lowering the salinity levels in bodies of salt water like the May River.

“A certain amount can be absorbed. But it’s like bloodletting, you can only do so much. ... The patient is getting pale,” Marsh said.

“We’re stopping the bleeding now,” he said, but urged the council to follow through.

Marsh and Garrett Budds of the Coastal Conservation League suggested a joint partnership between regional governments — county and municipal — to promote future environmental protection efforts.

“Volume was previously overlooked ... and we enthusiastically support your effort to address it,” Budds said.

“But we still need to address the traditional suburban development patterns” that contribute to accelerated runoff, he said. “Community redesign should be incorporated into the toolbox.”

Council Chairman Weston Newton agreed a “multi-government stormwater panel” is probably the next step.

“Stormwater runoff does not recognize jurisdictional boundaries,” Newton said.

Technical aspects of the new stormwater ordinance were explained by Ed Modzelewski and Tony Maglione of Applied Technology & Management (ATM), a coastal, environmental, marine and water resources engineering firm.

Both said total volume of stormwater runoff had been identified by the EPA as the “missing piece” in previous water quality efforts.

ATM wrote the draft ordinance to include “some new concepts and some old standbys” in best management practices, Maglione said.

“We didn’t go at this blind, we looked at every bit of information available,” he said. “Our mission was to create a technically defensible ordinance.”

The goals were preservation of fisheries and shellfish harvesting areas (with the possible restoration of closed areas) and prevention of further degradation of estuaries, Maglione said.

The resulting ordinance would retain stormwater on site at pre-development levels and would be implemented at three levels: new BMP requirements on future developments; adjustments to already-approved but not-yet-built projects; and retrofitting already-built areas.

Total retention “is possible and reasonable,” he said. “The toughest is step three.”

Councilman Rick Caporale suggested a tax-credit program to give property owners incentives to retrofit existing homes or businesses to comply with the new standards.

The prior omission of total volume “demonstrates an error in our thinking” that is now being corrected, Newton said. “We have to remember that the May River’s demise happened in the face of an expressed commitment to save the river.

“This is a great first step, but it’s just that — a first step.”