

Moratorium on proposals helpful, but not enough

Published Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Bluffton Town Council's recent decision to turn away any new development proposals until Beaufort County sorts out its new rules for stormwater runoff is to be applauded.

At its Sept. 15 meeting, Bluffton's council voted to not consider any new development plans until the county finishes its work or until 60 days has passed, whichever comes first.

But -- and this is a big but -- Bluffton's move does nothing to address what's already built or the plans already approved by the town. The 60-day stand-down on new development proposals, while helpful, is a very small step in a very big problem.

Re-evaluating existing systems and plans and retrofitting where needed also must happen.

The county is working on changes that would require the hydrology of an area to stay at pre-development levels. That includes the rate, volume, duration of flow and temperature of stormwater runoff. Neither Bluffton nor county ordinances require that now.

Scientists tell us saltwater estuaries and the creatures in them can be hurt by too much fresh water that comes too quickly, whether that water is polluted or not.

Increasingly, officials are looking to the volume and rate of stormwater runoff, as well as what's in it, to explain the increase in fecal coliform counts in the May River's headwaters.

In May, the state Department of Health and Environmental Control announced it would restrict shellfish harvesting in the upper reaches of the

river based on three years of water quality monitoring that showed rising levels of fecal coliform.

Monthly tests earlier this year showed fecal coliform counts had spiked to more than five times what state and federal standards allow.

While recent monthly counts have improved, the long-term trend is not good and points to the need to change what, where and how we build. And it points to retrofitting what's already been built.

Friday's concentrated downpour in and around Bluffton brought an extreme test of some drainage systems. Nearly eight inches of rain fell in a few hours. By Saturday, many of the lagoons that had flooded outside their banks Friday were back to near-normal levels. Where do you think all that water went in such a short time?

In June, town officials said they would notify developers and property owners associations of the town's plan to inspect stormwater controls in the May River watershed. The purpose was to ensure drainage systems are working as designed and permitted.

But that's not good enough. We need to do better than we've been doing, and that's what the county's new stormwater rules aim to do.

A lot of water has passed under the proverbial bridge in the past 10 years. Officials must look backward, as well as forward, in assessing what to do to restore our rivers to full health.