

## Officials must face up to hard choices on rivers

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It's hard to understand public officials who continue to approve high intensity development very close to the Okatie River and expect no problems.

We've had the science at our fingertips for more than a decade to guide us in what to do -- and what not to do -- to protect our rivers. We've simply chosen to ignore the hard choices.

Beaufort County Council Chairman Weston Newton asks for no recriminations in our failure to protect the May River, and closing any part of the river to oystering signifies failure. But we cannot reverse course if we aren't willing to admit mistakes. The truth is that the "best management practices" touted since Bluffton's first development agreement was signed in 1998 have not been good enough. And we don't have time to see whether the town's 2-year-old stormwater management ordinance is up to the job.

The hard choices we need to make include precluding development close to the fragile headwaters of our saltwater estuaries. Where we've already approved development, that could mean buying property and development rights to prevent that development. It could mean reopening development agreements negotiated a decade ago to see where we should do better on land use and intensity of development.

It also could mean stormwater systems already in place need to be substantially re-engineered. Too much water flowing to the May River too quickly hampers the saltwater estuary's ability to handle pollutants. At times, too little water seeps into the ground, which means not enough water makes its way to the river, upsetting the river's balance. In other words, stormwater retention ponds do not equal a natural wetland.

Residents of northern Beaufort County should heed the lessons from southern Beaufort County. Hard surfaces, changing water flow to the rivers, reduced habitat for wildlife, all add up to impaired rivers.

Studies, which generally consist of measuring the harm already done, won't turn the tide on protecting our rivers. Increased testing at more sites in the May River might reduce the magnitude of shellfish bed closures, but it won't reduce the pollutants reaching the river. Best management practices, as squishy a term as ever devised, offer no guarantees.

As for the Okatie, Bluffton Town Council's decision to allow a 178,632-square-foot shopping center near its headwaters to go ahead is predicated on the town's stormwater management requirements preventing any impact on the river. We won't know whether that's true until it's too

late, and we won't know whether the ordinance's requirement that stormwater systems be fixed if not working is enforceable -- or affordable if it falls to the town -- until that's tested.

Unfortunately, Bluffton's decision pales in comparison to what's coming across S.C. 170 in Hardeeville. Okatie Crossings, located on about 300 acres at the intersection of U.S. 278 and S.C. 170, is a 1.5-million square foot complex that includes multi-family housing. The site plan is dominated by paved parking lots. Unless the stormwater from that project is directed in the opposite direction, the Okatie stands little chance.

And it still might not be enough. More residents and more people traveling to shop there will increase traffic on U.S. 278 and S.C. 170. That alone increases the likelihood of polluting stormwater runoff.

Marc Orlando, Bluffton's assistant town manager for planning, asks, "Please tell us what in Bluffton you think isn't working because we believe it is."

We ask the town to show us what is working because the evidence says otherwise. The prospect of shellfish bed closures in the once pristine May River speaks volumes.