

Plan calls for protecting May River Road's rural character

By LIZ MITCHELL

lmitchell@islandpacket.com

843-706-8169

Published Monday, August 3, 2009

To prevent development from changing the character of Bluffton's May River Road and the health of its namesake waterway, residents are pushing for a plan to protect the area.

Those who live along the river have been working with Bluffton and Beaufort County staff since 2005 to draft the May River Community Preservation District Plan. The town of Bluffton's Planning Commission provided its input last week.

Bluffton resident Jimmy McIntire, chairman of the May River Road Planning Committee, said the document exemplifies what local residents care about -- protecting the river's health and the quality of life that comes from enjoying the water.

"The intent is for this area to pretty much stay as it is," McIntire said. "I think it's a giant statement of citizens who live along this corridor to say it should remain rural."

During the next few months, the plan will be considered by the Beaufort County Planning Board and, ultimately, the County Council.

The document would amend the Beaufort County Comprehensive Plan, which guides the area's growth, said county planning director Tony Criscitiello.

It was created to ensure land use in the town and county maintains the rural character of the May River corridor along S.C. 46 from Buck Island Road to Gibbet Road in Pritchardville. The corridor falls within both town and county jurisdictions.

The plan creates strict regulations on residential development and prohibits commercial uses except for fruit and vegetable stands and bed-and-breakfasts.

Under the plan, future development on the north side of S.C. 46 must include 60 percent open space, and residential development would be restricted to one unit per three acres.

On the south side of the highway, the requirements are the same except for part of the corridor east of Old Palmetto Bluff Road. The regulations there are stricter -- one unit per five acres -- to further protect the headwaters of the May River.

The headwaters currently are closed to shellfishing because of high levels of fecal coliform, a bacteria found in human and animal waste.

County community planner Brian Herrmann said the document stops sprawl and the kind of development often seen on U.S. 278 or S.C. 170. Shopping centers and large structures don't fit with plans to make S.C. 46 a scenic highway.

"We want it to be rural both in character and intensity, and then as you enter into town, the intensity picks up and you start to see little businesses -- that's kind of the goal," Herrmann said. "So buildings might appear like they are houses, because that fits in with the character. But in reality, it might be a little shop or a law office."

Don Blair, a member of the Bluffton Planning Commission, said one of the best aspects of the plan is that it came from the residents first.

"The plan has come out of community meetings from people who live along the highway," he said. "That means that people who own property along the highway have gone to the planners to say, 'We want to preserve our neighborhood the way it is, and that is rural.' And that is an exceptional kind of attitude."