



Proposed Work to Develop Town Wetland and Resiliency Zone Protections and Wetlands Restoration Program Data Gathering

Presentation to May River Watershed Action Plan Advisory Committee

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12/5/24



Background

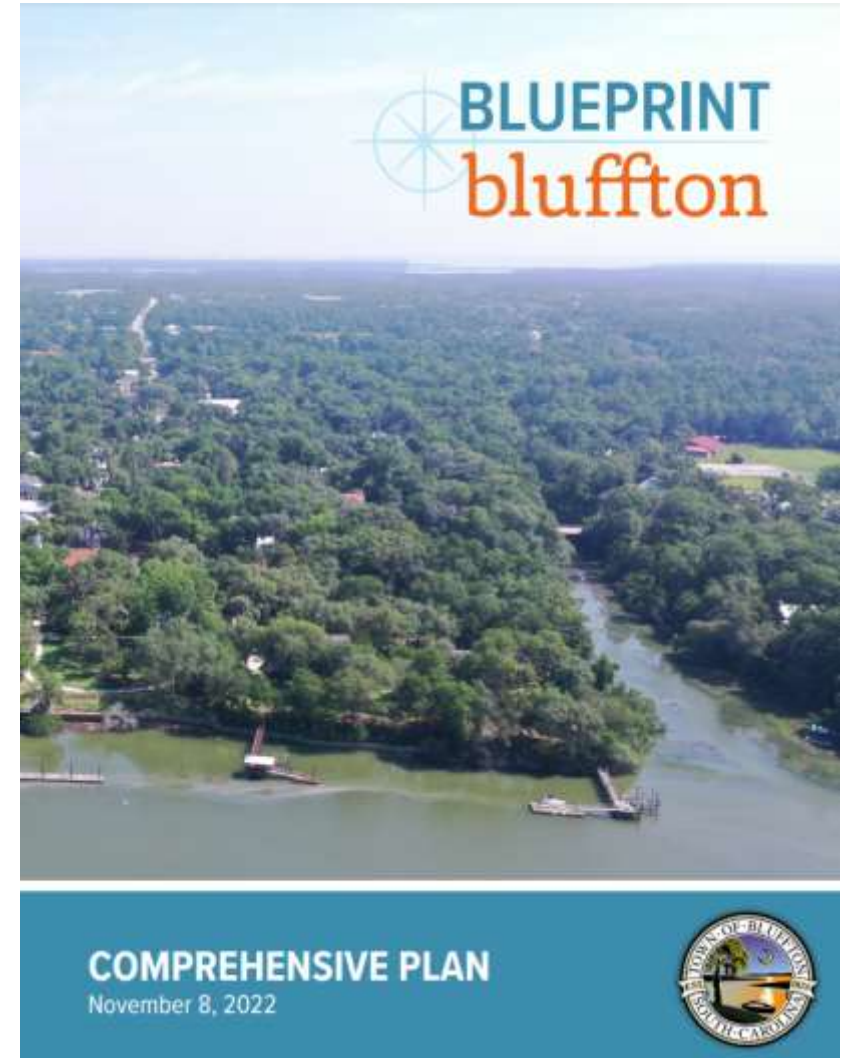
- Staff are proposing work associated with developing a Town Wetlands and Resiliency Zone Protections in Fiscal Year 2025 and data gathering needs related to a potential Town Wetlands Restoration Program in Fiscal Year 2026.





Background

- Town of Bluffton Comprehensive Plan
 - Known as Blueprint Bluffton
 - Intended to guide decision making for the next ten (10) years. Vision for the Town of Bluffton.
- In 2022, the SC Comprehensive Planning Enabling Act required local governments to add a resilience element to comprehensive plans.
- Blueprint Bluffton adopted in November 2022
- For the first time, included a Resilience Chapter to meet this requirement & prepare the Town for a more resilient future.



Background



- Town of Bluffton Strategic Planning
 - Used to implement the Town's Comprehensive Plan
 - Developed every two (2) years, with annual reviews
 - Uses Strategic Focus Areas and Strategies to:
 - Develop operating budget,
 - Consider revisions to capital improvement projects,
 - Develop new projects and assign them to Staff for execution,
 - Implement projects & initiatives already approved in existing town plans, and
 - Determine an agree-upon process & schedule to prioritize projects & revise priorities as necessary

Background



STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS



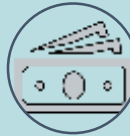
Affordable and/or Workforce Housing



Community Quality of Life



Economic Development



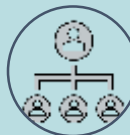
Fiscal Sustainability



Infrastructure



May River and Surrounding Rivers
and Watersheds



Town Organization

Background



Guiding Principle 4:

Support active planning and management for resilience of natural resources and our response to weather events, future disasters and changing environmental conditions.

Action Agenda Item:

Develop a resiliency plan focused on the Town's natural resources, sustainability, wetland ordinance/restoration and environmental principals.

Wetlands Protection Background



- Wetlands
 - Commonly known as bogs, bayous, marshes, or swamps, are vital for protecting water quality and aquatic ecosystems.
 - They also help control flooding and can be an important economic source for communities.
- Certain wetlands that fall within the scope of the federal Clean Water Act (CWA) are protected by permitting programs managed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps).
- Complex legal battles over the EPA and Corps' wetland definition(s) have occurred since 2015.

Wetlands Protection Background



- In May 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court's *Sackett* decision changed the regulatory landscape for millions of acres of wetlands previously understood to fall within the scope of the CWA.
- As a result, many of the wetlands that the Corps had previously determined were jurisdictional because they affect water quality and ecosystems are no longer entitled to federal protection.
- These wetlands are now left vulnerable to development unless they are protected by state or local law.
- At this time, wetlands regulations in South Carolina have been limited.



Proposed Wetlands Protection Work

- Review Current Local Policies
- Review the South Carolina Environmental Law Project (SCELP) Model Ordinance
- Wetland Identification within Municipal Jurisdiction
- Define & Catalog Town Wetland Areas (identify commonalities between Town wetlands & inundation areas)
- Map Town Wetland Areas to be Protected
- Develop Draft & Final Wetland Ordinance for Adoption by Town



Resiliency Zone Protection Background



- Since 2021, The Town has been implementing Comprehensive Drainage Studies throughout the Town's jurisdiction.
- The Heyward Cove Watershed Study was completed in October 2023 and serves as a model for all other Comprehensive Drainage Studies in progress or planned for future fiscal years.
- These studies include evaluating the existing stormwater system under resiliency conditions using a projected sea-level rise (SLR) boundary condition alongside the 25-, 50-, and 100-year storm events.

Resiliency Zone Protection Background



- This type of evaluation results in the identification of stormwater Capital Improvement Projects (CIP) that may be necessary with higher intensity rainfall patterns, as well as the identification of inundation areas (areas that are flooded and store water during a storm event) for the 25-, 50-, and 100-year storm events.
- These inundation areas add to the information about wetland locations, allowing the Town to see which flood-prone areas may exceed wetland boundaries and require additional mitigation measures.

Proposed Resiliency Zone Protection Work



- Develop Draft and Final Resiliency Ordinance
- Comprehensive Drainage Heyward Cove Findings & Proposed Inclusions
 - Will Offer Recommendations on Application of Study Findings to Buffer and Protection Areas
 - Will Work with the Town's Legal Advisor
- Identify Primary Conveyance Systems
 - GIS Creation of Functional Classification System
 - Will Work with the Town's Legal Advisor
- Mapping of "Resilience Zones"

Wetland Restoration Program Background



- Understanding how wetlands function is necessary to reverse degradation and improve livability.
- Wetland conditions directly influence wetlands' ability to provide essential ecosystem services.
- Wetland restoration involves restoring a former or degraded wetland's physical, chemical, or biological characteristics to return to its natural functions.
- Wetland restoration can potentially reduce urban flooding, improve water quality, and restore plant and wildlife habitat.

Proposed Wetland Restoration Program Work



- Outline Wetland Functions & How Used to Classify Wetlands
- Determine Requirements for Evaluation Tool and Define Criteria to be Considered in Wetland Classification
- Determine Ecological/Function Condition of Town Wetlands
- Assess Potential for Remote Derivation of Wetlands Condition Assessment
 - Wetland Condition Scores for the Town's Wetlands Using Remotely Sensed Landscape Metrics
- Review Local Wetland Restoration Programs
- Identify Potential Partners & Funding Mechanisms

Next Steps



- 12/05/2024 – WAPAC discussion and recommendation to Town Council
- 01/14/2025 – Town Council considers authorizing Town Manager to execute a Task Authorization with McCormick Taylor, Inc.
- 01/2025 – 02/2025 – If authorized, initiate work on Wetland and Resiliency Zone Protections. Work for the Wetlands and Resiliency Zone Protection Ordinances will be developed concurrently.
- 07/2025 – 08/2025 – If funded in the Town's FY26 Consolidated Budget, initiate work on data gathering associated with a Potential Wetlands Restoration Program

Request



Staff requests that the May River Watershed Action Plan Advisory Committee (WAPAC) recommend Town Council fund work associated with engineering services to develop Town Wetlands and Resiliency Zone Protections in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 and data gathering needs related to a potential Town Wetlands Restoration Program in Fiscal Year 2026.



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

Proposed Motion



“I move to recommend that Town Council fund Fiscal Year 2025 and 2026 work associated with engineering services to develop Town Wetlands and Resiliency Zone Protections and Data Gathering Needs Related to a Potential Town Wetlands Restoration Program.”