

TOWN COUNCIL



STAFF REPORT Projects and Watershed Resilience Department

MEETING DATE:	May 12, 2026
PROJECT:	Consideration of a Resolution Authorizing the Approval of a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of South Carolina Beaufort for Microbial Source Tracking Laboratory Services
PROJECT MANAGER:	Beth Lewis, Watershed Resilience Manager

REQUEST: Staff requests Town Council consider approval of a Resolution authorizing renewal of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the University of South Carolina Beaufort (USCB) and the Town of Bluffton for Microbial Source Tracking Services at a cost of \$60,000 per year.

BACKGROUND: The Town of Bluffton's Microbial Source Tracking (MST) Sampling Program began in late 2016/early 2017 under the guidance of the May River Watershed Action Plan Advisory Committee (WAPAC). MST was introduced as a tool to aid in the identification of fecal coliform contamination sources and guide targeted mitigation efforts. In MST, water samples are analyzed for unique genetic markers found in gut bacteria which identifies source organisms.

With input from WAPAC, the Town prioritized human sources of contamination, particularly failing septic tanks. These pose a higher public health risk and represent a controllable source of fecal pollution once identified and addressed. The MST Program was implemented with the goal of determining whether human fecal sources contributed to the elevated bacterial concentrations.

Since the MST Program was established, the Town transitioned in late 2021 from using a contracted lab in Miami Lakes, FL, to partnering with the University of South Carolina Beaufort (USCB). This partnership with USCB led to establishing and funding a regional MST laboratory to analyze the Town's water quality samples. Since establishing the USCB MST Laboratory, the range of genetic markers used to identify fecal contamination from various animal sources has expanded beyond humans to include dogs, birds, deer, and horses.

The original MOU agreement entered into July 9, 2021, requires updating to reflect changing Town monitoring needs, water quality monitoring capabilities and expenses by USCB. The current MOU, entered into July 9, 2021, expires on June 30, 2026, and requires renewal to continue MST services.

The USCB MST Laboratory has provided analytical, technical, and programmatic support essential to implement the 2020 May River Watershed Action Plan Update and Model Report, meet National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) permit requirements, and further the Town's goal to protect human health and the environment.

MST data have guided several important initiatives, including:

- Adoption of the Town's Sewer Extension & Connection Policy by Town Council in September 2017;
- Amendment of the Sewer Ordinance and creation of the Septic to Sewer Conversion Program in September 2018;
- Implementing Capital Improvement Program (CIP) projects for sewer extension and connection in Bluffton's Historic District, supported by 319 grant funds;
- Collaboration on sewer extension projects with Beaufort-Jasper Water & Sewer Authority (BJWSA), Beaufort County, and private property owners in the May River headwaters; and
- Development of educational handouts, neighborhood canvassing, social media campaigns, enhanced regional coordination, identification and elimination of sources of fecal bacteria, and creation of the Town Pet Waste Station Program.

NEXT STEPS: Upon Town Council approval, the Town Manger will execute a MOU with the USCB to fund the MST Laboratory (Attachment 1 – Resolution, Exhibit A MOU) at USCB.

SUMMARY: This project is supportive of the following Strategic Plan Guiding Principles:

Community Quality of Life

Guiding Principle #6: Foster town policies and practices that encourage environmentally conscious initiatives, policies and town codes that support a clean well-maintained, sustainable community that protects our natural resources including the May River.

May River & Surrounding Rivers and Watersheds

Guiding Principle #1: Support initiatives, such as the May River Watershed Action Plan, to improve water quality of the May, Okatie/Colleton and New Rivers and their watersheds.

Guiding Principle #2: Seek collaboration and partnerships that protect and improve the May, Okatie/Colleton and New Rivers and their watershed.

Staff are requesting Town Council authorize the Town Manager to execute a MOU with USCB.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Resolution
 - A. MOU to Fund a Microbial Source Laboratory with the University of South Carolina Beaufort
2. Proposed Motion