

County may help study stormwater

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Bay Minette - Baldwin County will likely support a regional stormwater study that evaluates charging monthly utility fees to citizens to help protect water quality under the pressure of rapid development, commissioners said. On behalf of the Baldwin County Stormwater Working Group, David Yeager, who is also director of the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, asked the commission Tuesday to commit \$17,000 to help support a \$60,000 study on regional stormwater management.

According to a letter submitted to the county by the group, conducting the study would cost \$60,000 and include five meetings with government and nonprofit agency representatives to explore:

- *The need of a regional stormwater authority and how it would be organized.

- *Mechanisms for creating a source of funds to sustain the program.

- *Drafting of legislation for stormwater management fees that could be assessed on citizens and businesses by municipalities and the county.

The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve and the Alabama Coastal Foundation would cover half of the study's cost.

The Baldwin County Stormwater Working Group grew out of Fairhope's Blue Water Committee, which was working to develop a countywide stormwater strategy, Yeager said.

"We have identified one of the best-known municipal stormwater experts in the United States to conduct this study and education effort and prepare a report of findings to include a model stormwater approach that could fit the needs of Baldwin County and its municipalities," Yeager wrote in a letter to the commission.

Co-author of the book "Municipal Stormwater Management," the consultant, Andrew Reese, is vice president for AMEC Earth and Environmental, and has more than 30 years of experience in a variety of fields including stormwater management, water resources, engineering research and management roles, according to the letter.

Eleven of Baldwin's 13 municipalities have committed funds based on their populations to cover the additional \$13,000, Yeager said.

Bay Minette has declined to submit funding, but has said it will still designate a representative to participate in the study, he said.

Yeager hasn't presented the initiative to the recently incorporated Magnolia Springs community, but plans to, he said.

At Tuesday's work session, Commissioner Frank Burt and Chairman Albert Lipscomb asked questions about the study, such as whether it would interfere with different initiatives if the county should explore other options or complete the ongoing strategic plan before it takes any action.

Burt said that Baldwin should consider reviewing Shelby County's stormwater management plan.

"I think if we looked at their plan first before we buy something else, it may be what we need," he said.

Yeager said that the study could include a review of Shelby's plan to decide if parts would apply to Baldwin.

Commissioner Ed Bishop and Vice Chairman Wayne Gruenloh indicated they would support funding the initiative out of their own discretionary funds, if they had to.

Burt and Lipscomb later indicated that they would probably support the study in a vote planned for the Sept. 5 meeting.

"We are kind of looking at the obvious," Gruenloh said. "If we wanted to wait a month or so, we are kidding ourselves."

Bishop said that the stormwater issue is prevalent, particularly in south Baldwin, and needs to be addressed.

"I am willing to do my share and I hope some of y'all will be too," he said.

In addition to the funds, Baldwin officials would also need to appoint a county staff person, an assistant and an alternative to participate in meetings that will start this week.

An increase in impervious surfaces is a symptom of Baldwin's explosive growth, Yeager said in a telephone interview Monday. As the impervious surfaces increase, so do the amount and velocity of stormwater carrying pollutants from streets, parking lots, lawns and farms to water bodies, Yeager said.

Following implementation of the 1977 federal Clean Water Act - which established a system for regulating discharges of pollutants into U.S. waters - threats to the environment have switched from industrial hazards to nonpoint source pollution, Yeager said. Nonpoint source pollution is caused by rain or snow carrying natural and manmade pollutants from surfaces and depositing them into local water bodies or underground sources of drinking water, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Web site.

"Every eight months, the oil and petrochemical products that wash off our roadways and parking lots is equivalent to an Exxon Valdez spill," Yeager said.

Most local systems rely on a number of stormwater management methods including subdivision regulations, retention ponds and the enforcement of best management practices and the Clean Water Act through federal and state agencies. But stormwater is not treated in a physical plant or on a coordinated regional scale, Yeager said.

If the governments decide to move forward with such a plan, the changes could be paid for by a stormwater fee that would allow the county to build infrastructure, manage stormwater, save for future treatments or maintain a facility, Yeager said.

Speaking in general terms, the utility fee could cost the average homeowner \$2 to \$3 a month, he said.

The funding could be used by a community to create infrastructure to manage stormwater, future treatment or maintenance of a facility

At the very least, the countywide meetings would allow leaders to evaluate the various methods for addressing stormwater challenges and define a custom fit for Baldwin, Yeager said.

"We would like for them to at least have some common approaches," he said.