

# 50 years of safe harbor

*Harbor 2-21-13*  
✓ On April 19, 1964, 360 boat slips were dedicated in a new small craft harbor at Woods Lagoon. The event culminated an effort that began when fishermen anchored their boats offshore and tied to the now-defunct railroad wharf and,



**DAN  
HAIFLEY**

*Our Ocean Backyard*

after 1914, today's municipal wharf.

Strong swells or storms would toss vessels onto the beach, often ruining them beyond repair, driving the search for safe harbor.

The federal government conducted surveys

in 1879 and 1915, both times recommending a sheltered port for Santa Cruz. In 1949, a third effort yielded a positive report and this time, the Army Corps of Engineers put political muscle behind it.

The Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce launched a community organizing effort by leaders including Malio Stagnaro, Worth Brown, Norm Lezin, Henry Mello, Victor Ghio, Bert Snyder and Paul Groszmann. In 1951, they asked voters to approve a tax and formation of a special governmental district, and won.

A new five-member port commission got to work recommending a site, considering Neary Lagoon, the San Lorenzo River, Woods Lagoon, Watsonville and Capitola. They even looked at an ocean harbor off Lighthouse Point.

Woods Lagoon became the compromise choice, despite the problems of sand drift from the San Lorenzo River that could clog its channel. The Army Corps officially adopted it provided that the channel would be kept navigable with a "sand bypass system." And thus a campaign to lobby Sacramento and Washington began.

In 1962, Congress appropriated \$1.6 million to build jetties and dig a harbor channel and a local share was paid from taxes accumulated since 1951. \$3 million in state loans was obtained for pilings, docks, restrooms and parking facilities on the condition the port would be accessible to all Californians.

The first year a tsunami hit and the sand dredge was feared lost. Friends Jack O'Neill, Jerry Colfer and Bob Judd located it, got it off the sea floor, pulling it in for repairs. The harbor's popularity compelled the commission to approve a new upper harbor on the inland side of the train trestle. So at a cost of \$5 million, 455 more slips were ready in 1973.

In the late 1970s controversial state legislation to ban surfing between the harbor's jetties was approved, and another law was approved allowing voters to select the governing port commission. The debate over surfing cooled after the harbor took control of its dredge operation, creating a deeper channel at its entrance, but legends of jetty surfers — including Harbor Bill — remain.

Businesses serving non-boaters settled in at the harbor's dedication. In 1965, the O'Neill Building was built and today its upstairs houses O'Neill Sea Odyssey's ocean science education center and private tenant spaces managed by the nonprofit, including the Surfrider Foundation's lab and office. The Sea Witch coffee shop was transformed into the Crow's Nest restaurant in 1979. Aldo's had also been at that location then moved to the other side of the channel.

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In the mid-1990s the harbor lost the remaining property tax funds voters had awarded it in 1951. Port commissioners grappled with how they'd use their diminished revenue to meet capital renovation needs 50 years after the harbor's construction. But then the March 11, 2011 tsunami that devastated Fukushima, Japan, before it crossed the Pacific did enough damage to the harbor to require around \$20

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million in infrastructure repairs, not including damage to boats or private property. The state and federal government are covering all but about \$1.2 million of those costs,

allowing repair of aging infrastructure.

The Santa Cruz Harbor is also home to the Santa Cruz Yacht Club, established in 1928 and situated on the municipal wharf before the harbor's construction. Sailing innovation was behind the victory of Santa Cruz' Merlin in the 1977 Trans-

Pacific race and today the club continues its sailing and charitable activities. Much of the political drive for a sheltered port came from fishermen and 150 fishing boats took refuge when the harbor opened and the industry hit its peak in the 70s and 80s. Today, 40 boats still operate, with crab and

salmon as primary target species.

Next year will mark 50 years of safe harbor.

For information, visit [www.santacruzharbor.com](http://www.santacruzharbor.com).

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*Dan Haifley is executive director of O'Neill Sea Odyssey. He can be reached at [dhaifley@oneillseaodyssey.org](mailto:dhaifley@oneillseaodyssey.org).*