

Plan to shore up cliff-top apartments faces more hurdles

Erosion

By BOB SMITH

Two old controversies — riprap and the Crest Apartments — flared anew Monday night in Capitola.

Coupled for the first time, the issues attracted one of the largest crowds yet in the new city council chambers for a planning commission meetings.

For the past several years, waves have been steadily undermining the corner of the Crest Apartments, perched high above the village on Grand Avenue. Recently, the foundations have been undercut to the point that nearly eight feet of the apartments are hanging over a 100-foot drop.

Capitola engineer George Washington was hired to design a plan to shore up the apartments, and to stop further erosion of the cliffs below.

He submitted plans to the city, calling for riprap to be placed at the base of the cliffs, in the hollow formed by the waves to the east of the county sanitation district's pumping plant.

Inside the apartments, caissons would be driven deep into the cliffs, and the foundation

strengthened. Slump stone walls would be constructed underneath the exposed foundations. And a silicone material would be injected into the sand beneath the apartments, turning the porous sand into a stone-like material.

The cost would be approximately \$75,000.

The planning commission approved a use permit and architectural and site review for the project, but city residents let Washington know he'll have a battle to get approval from the Capitola city council, the Santa Cruz County Sanitation District, the Regional Coastal Commission, the state Lands Commission and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Washington is acting as the agent for the Bank of America and Mary Tirali, owners of the property.

Before work can start, he needs permission from the Capitola city council to trespass over city property to place the rock at the base of the cliffs, an okay from the sanitation district to build a temporary roadway around the sanitation district plant to place the riprap, approval from the state lands commission and the Army to do anything along the beach, and approval of the entire project by the regional Coastal Commission.

Explaining the details, Washington told the commission and audience:

"The only reason for the slump stone is to make it more acceptable to the fishermen and the fishes in Monterey Bay.

"Inside the apartments, there will be a very elaborate underpinning and cantilevering of the foundation. We also propose to chemically solidify the sand underneath the apartments so it can't erode.

"Within the limits of reasonable engineering design, we'll gain a measure of safety. With riprap, there will be no erosion of the Crest Apartments."

What about access to the beach between Capitola and New Brighton Beach, many audience members wanted to know. Will the riprap shut off pedestrian access?

Washington didn't think anyone should be out there.

"The beach from the sanitary plant to New Brighton Beach is a very dangerous area. One man has been killed out there.

"Although it has the appearance of a nice little beach, it is one of the most dangerous places in the city."

Mollie and Fellow Sterns own the house at 110 Grand Ave. and the lot next to the Crest Apartments.

When Washington told him they'd like to use his vacant lot to move building materials into the Crest Apartments, Sterns answered:

"You may not borrow my lot."

Sterns was also emphatic that no riprap would be placed at the base of his property — even if it would halt erosion there too.

Sterns questioned if the riprap for the Crest Apartments would change the wave patterns again and increase the erosion into his land.

Washington said his professional opinion was that it would not affect the Sterns property, and then added:

"If we put riprap in front of your lot, it would be a Godsend. You'll lose your lot otherwise."

The Crest apartments were built some 15 years ago only after the city council traded a 10 foot strip of city park land along Grand Avenue to the developer in exchange for 10 feet of cliff face and tideland.

Depot Hill and Village residents have been critical of the apartments since.

Many Monday night opposed any action that would save the threatened apartment units or that would block access to the wild beach area below.

Beverly Justin told the commission:

"I think it is important that people can walk on the beach."

Another woman echoed her thoughts:

"I have been walking on the beach for 50 years. I hate to see it cut off at low tide. There are hundreds of people who use it."

Washington's sketches showed the riprap would extend seaward about two-thirds the length of the concrete platform on the east side of sewer pumping station. Beach goers, he said would still have low tide access around the base of the pumping station.

"Truthfully," said Mrs. Doreen Arthur, "I'd like to see the whole thing dumped into the ocean. I don't see why the city should give a go-ahead."

Former planning commissioner Scott Owen told Washington that he likes living dangerously, and would take the risk that the cliff might fall on him. He then added:

"The Crest Apartments destroy an otherwise pretty area. I

certainly hate to see a very pleasurable area destroyed to save a building."

Washington responded: "I think the best thing is to discourage the use of the beach."

One Crest apartment resident, Carl Tripoli, said the 1½-ton boulders could provide an emergency escape route for people trapped by high tide.

At least one home was moved off the cliff edge when erosion threatened it. The city refused permission to erect a second home, designed by Washington, on the same lot, two years ago.

Washington told the commission Monday night:

"Nothing on that side of the Grand Avenue (the ocean side) is safe. But the apartments are here today and I'm trying to save them."

With the public hearing closed, the commission considered the issue.

"My personal opinion," said Alvin Wilder, "is that I'd like to see the Crest Apartment off that cliff. But that isn't the question. The man has the right to make emergency repairs.

"I am concerned about the adequacy of the repairs," he added. Explaining that he had confidence in the state and the Army reviewing the riprap, the

work.

Commissioner Jack Nicol, agreeing with Washington, said: "I'm in favor of this—the rock will keep people away from the cliffs."

Commissioner Howard Dysle argued unsuccessfully for a walk

across or around the riprap to provide beach access.

The permits were granted unanimously with Wilder tacking on an amendment that the final design would be reviewed by the planning commission and the city engineer.