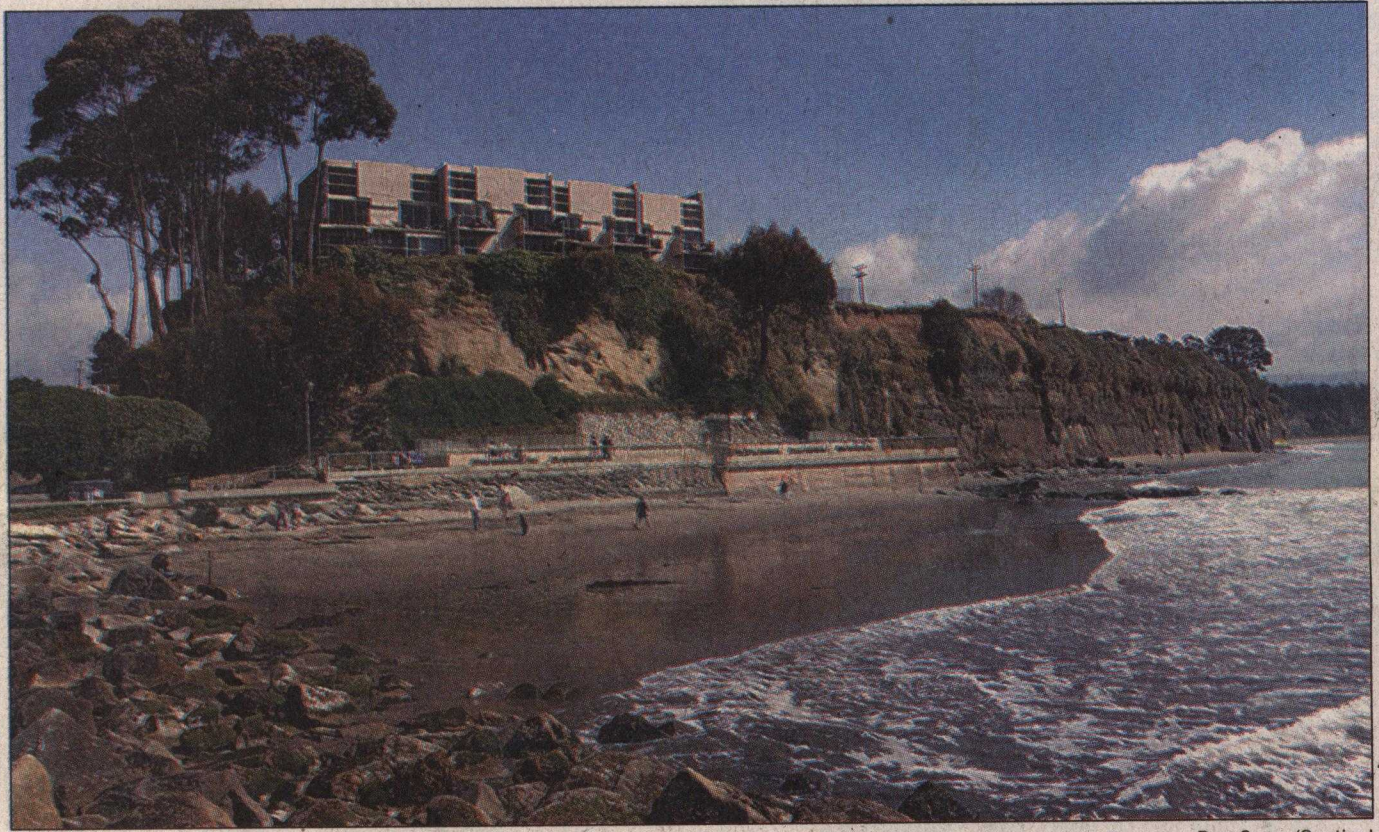


Wave of protest hits Depot Hill seawall plan



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

TOP: A group of Depot Hills property owners is proposing a 1,200-foot seawall for the exposed cliff from Central to Livermore avenues, but other residents oppose the wall. **BELOW:** Erosion already has claimed sections of Grand Avenue.

Other erosion solutions proposed

By **RAMONA TURNER**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Beach erosion
CAPITOLA — A \$2 million seawall proposed to protect historic Depot Hill from wave-driven erosion faces opposition from several homeowners who would have to foot the bill.

Besides the cost, limiting people's access to the coastline is also a concern.

Those in favor of building the seawall insist it is needed to protect the oceanfront homes and a sewer line serving them, and a popular pedestrian walkway.

The environmental impact report drafted by EMC Planning Group Inc. of Monterey estimates the wall would protect the homes and sewer line for about 75 years. Without the wall, the report states, the line would be lost in 10 to 15 years



and oceanfront homes would be threatened in about 35 years.

The report is available for public review until May 24. Once the public-comment period ends, the proposal will go before the city Planning Commission and City Council. If

Capitola signs off on the proposal, the California Coastal Commission could consider it next year, said Stephen Graves, project coordinator.

If the Coastal Commission approves the wall, construction could begin that same year.

Building the seawall

Talk of armoring Capitola's coastline, from Depot Hill to New Brighton State Beach, has been in the air since the early 1990s. In the mid- to late '90s, a group of Depot Hill property owners won approval from the City Council to form a Geological Hazard Abatement District to research and fund the wall.

The district comprises 18 property owners who would have to pay the \$2 million cost. But several property owners, including Tim and Denise Ryan, don't want a wall. The Ryans, who opposed forming the district, contend the price is too high for property owners to bear.

Then there are the environmental concerns.

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Seawall

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"We simply cannot seawall and armor the entire coast without severe repercussions," said Denise Ryan, who has owned her Hollister Avenue home for about 15 years.

The Ryans' home sits at the end of the avenue and beyond the reach of the eroded Grand Avenue path, which stops just past Oakland Avenue. While their property extends to the cliff's edge, their home is about 50 feet inland.

The proposal calls for a 1,257-foot seawall to be built along the base of Depot Hill's cliff, from Central to Livermore avenues. The structure, made of a material resembling a natural cliff face, would be 25 feet tall, with about 21 feet of it above ground against the 80-foot cliff.

The wall is intended to extend the life of the wave-battered cliff, which loses about a foot every year, according to the EIR. Slowing the erosion is intended, in part, to extend the life of Grand Avenue.

Long a popular path to walk and enjoy a view of the Monterey Bay, Grand Avenue became even more popular for pedestrians when erosion forced car-traffic restrictions 20 years ago. Fencing protects walkers from a steep drop to the shore below.

John Hart, a member of the abatement district who's owned a home along the threatened path for nine years, believes building the wall is crucial.

"As cliff erosion continues, much of the public access will soon be lost," said Hart. "The only way to prevent this is to build the seawall we are proposing."

The EIR shows a wall would preserve the Grand Avenue path for 25 to 75 years. Without the wall, wave erosion from below and topsoil erosion could wipe it out in 10 to 15 years.

Leave it alone

The Ryans have no problem with letting Mother Nature take its course.

"This cliff is a museum of natural history," said Denise Ryan. "On any given day, you can walk down there during low tide and find relics that are 3 million to 8 million years old. Educators and students view this cliff as a paleontological gold mine."

It's a unique site filled with fossilized sea creatures such as whale and fish bones and plankton, experts say. A seawall would limit access to those treasures for the wall's 50- to 100-year life span.

"The report says that the fossils will be accessible then," said Frank Perry, a paleontological consultant for the San Cruz City Museum of Natural History and president of the Monterey Bay Paleontological Society. "That doesn't do anything for the people here today."

A number of studies are ongoing at the proposed project site, including one on



A group of Depot Hill property owners are proposing a 1,200-foot seawall to shore up the exposed cliffs from Central to Livermore avenues, but others say the wall would cover a valuable fossil record used by many students in the county, and cause other problems.

Dan Coyro/
Sentinel

the evolution of sharks, and Perry himself is studying fossil vertebrates there. The environmental report recommends a paleontologist be hired to salvage prehistoric items and fossils during construction.

The site also is visited regularly by interpretive programs at New Brighton State Beach, organizations such as the Geological Society of America and UC Santa Cruz students writing their senior theses.

Opponents of the wall point to another flaw in the proposal: There's a 300-foot gap between the promenade at Capitola Beach and the beginning of the cliff. That gap — no one lays claim to the stretch of property above the cliff — would allow waves to strike the bare cliff, thus continuing the erosion and endangering a seawall.

Approval process

Getting seawall approval from the Coastal Commission is no easy task.

The commission in November rejected a seawall proposed along East Cliff Drive near Pleasure Point's world-famous surf break. The county-backed plan called for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build a 1,100-foot wall between 32nd and 36th avenues.

But the commission decided that alternatives had not been adequately explored.

Supporters of the Pleasure Point wall said the structure would stabilize an eroding cliff and preserve coastal access by saving East Cliff Drive, used daily by thousands of cyclists, walkers and surfers.

However, opponents favored using more natural solutions to slow erosion,

such as planting more vegetation to stabilize the bluff top and limiting vehicle weight on East Cliff Drive.

About 10 percent, or roughly 108 miles, of California's 1,100-mile coastline is armored with either rip-rap — a pile of rocks, like that at Pleasure Point — or a seawall.

"Rocks and seawalls are everywhere," Gary Griggs, an erosion and seawall expert who teaches at UCSC, wrote in the paper "Saving the Coastline — At What Cost?"

"Nearly 100 percent of the oceanfront of the cities of Long Beach and San Clemente have been protected, as has 80 percent of the city of Seal Beach and 70 percent of the Oceanside's shoreline."

The Capitola EIR envisions the Monterey Bay Area headed in the same direction. And that has some people, including Coastal Commission members, saying maybe enough is enough and that seawall alternatives need to be pursued.

Several environmental problems can arise when the shoreline is armored, including the starvation of sand from downstream beaches, as sand is created by erosion from rivers, streams and waves pounding cliffs — like at Depot Hill.

Dan Carl, project planner for the Coastal Commission, points to other erosion solutions.

"Pleasure Point wants a seawall, but there are a whole range of things that can be done, including drainage control and landscaping to stabilize the top of the cliff," said Carl. "It's not final but it does help to slow down the rate of erosion and extend the cliff's life."

For homes in the path of erosion, Carl said the commission is leaning toward having homeowners move their houses

or the county buy them and convert the property to public use.

The commission also wants communities to look at beach-nourishment programs such as trucking in sand to help buffer wave action against vulnerable cliffs.

But the Capitola project EIR says those options do not accomplish the seawall project's goal of preserving public access to the sweeping views of the Monterey Bay from Grand Avenue.

Fighting the seawall

Since Carl's list of possible alternatives aren't part of the Coastal Commission's policy, the authority weighs each project on a case-by-case basis.

Hoping to demonstrate widespread support for the wall, Hart and other property owners plan a public-awareness campaign to urge supporters to voice their opinions to city officials and the Coastal Commission.

The group has also proposed forming lobbying pacts with other communities in the state — including Pleasure Point — that are trying to build seawalls.

Meanwhile, the Ryans vow to do whatever it takes to keep the wall from being built.

"I'd probably chain myself to the cliff and insist they earth-move me before they wall up 3½-million to 5-million-year-old sea fossils," Denise Ryan said.

The environmental impact report is available for public review until May 24 at the Capitola library, 2005 Wharf Road and the central library, 224 Church St.

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