

*'I don't want a tourist trap. People could go to the Boardwalk for that'*



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Robert Wilks has spent his life hanging around the Capitola Wharf and is now employed at the boat-rental business.

# Capitola loves its plain old wharf

City considers \$1 million in repair costs for venerable old structure

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Capitola-1990 CAPITOLA

IT DOESN'T HAVE any glop-py candy shops or knick-knack boutiques. You can't even park your car on the thing.

But Capitola deeply loves its plain old creaking wharf — so much, in fact, that residents may spend more than \$1 million in the next two years just to keep it in shape. One group is even planning a big 140th birthday party for it in the fall.

Outsiders may wonder what on earth is going on here. For a city of just 10,000, \$1 million is a lot of money, especially considering it's being used just to preserve the wharf, not gussy up its image for more tourist revenue. The money would be the most the city has ever spent on the wharf. Why all this attention and hard work?

The answer is that Capitola history began with the wharf. People can't help but admire the way it has survived storms, fires and old age. Residents don't seem envious of Santa Cruz's popular version up the coast. Some even bristle at any comparisons.

It's going to be a big year for



When Mal Cacasola wants to wet his lines, he rides his bike out to the Capitola Wharf.

Capitola's oldest landmark. But ask locals if they want to see something flashier or fancier, and you're likely to hear some grumbling.

"I think it should be an attraction, but in a plain sense," said

27-year-old Robert Wilks, who has come to fish here since he was a child. "I don't want a tourist trap. People could go to the Boardwalk for that. We want people on the wharf. But fishing isn't flashy. You get up in the morn-

ing. You smell like fish all day long."

"It's the oldest thing in town," said historian Carolyn Swift, director of the Capitola Historical Museum. "It's the point from which Capitola grew." It's easy to go drinking, coffee-slurping and people-ogling in Capitola 100 times and never visit — or even see — the wharf. From certain Esplanade restaurant windows, the wharf is invisible, tucked behind a sand bar.

Its carved wooden entrance sign is easy to miss. And it has just a long wooden walkway, a single restaurant and a boat rental business with a small store next door.

But this lack of flashiness can be appealing. Walking down the planks among the gulls and the strikingly fat pigeons, visitors have little to distract them from the fog and waves of Monterey Bay.

A visitor can spend hours watching little scenes. On Friday, a popular mop-haired restaurateur bragged he'd bagged a sting-ray. A little boy screamed that he'd caught a salmon. It turned out to be a slimy tangle of kelp. A

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# Capitola Wharf

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frowning old man with a yellow windbreaker cast his line in the bay and caught nothing but a pylon.

Plainspoken toughness seems to be built into the very history of this wharf. It has taken so many beatings, and has been rebuilt so often, that nary a splinter exists from its original 1857 incarnation. It's also been viewed as important from the very beginning. Even before he built his resort in what is now Capitola, regional developer Frederick Hihn rebuilt the wharf, extending it to 1,200 feet in 1863.

Trying to build up the wharf or make it fancy often backfired. In 1912, bad weather and waves sliced the wharf in two.

In 1925, a large yacht club opened up on the wharf but never took off. "They tried to make this fancy image for Capitola, a place where wealthy people would come," Swift said. "But nothing happened. And then, in 1939, (the club) burned down. Finally."

Now, residents seem to accept that smaller and simpler is better.

They may have no choice in the matter. City Manager Susan Westman said it's unlikely the wharf would attract any more businesses. "In any kind of inclement weather, it's hard for businesses there to attract customers," she said. "I'm not sure it's a good location."

Even if businesses wanted to move in, they probably couldn't. Considering the wharf's location and brutal history, federal flood regulations prevent any more stores or restaurants from moving in, Westman said.

But simply preserving the same-ness is grueling work. The place needs serious work.

The last major renovation was in 1982. But more high waters were



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The Capitola Wharf is a popular place for a stroll.

coming.

"In 1983, I worked down at Mr. Toots as a coffee jerk," said Swift, the historian. "I was just opening and the waves came in. I said, 'Oh my God, it's happening again!' I called the newspaper, made coffee for everyone, and we all watched the end of the wharf go away."

Looking at past disasters, it's no wonder wharf users want serious repairs. "They should be looking at the long run, not Band-Aid patches," said Sally Ealy, owner of the Capitola Boat & Bait store on the wharf. "I hope they really research this. I don't want to see a 2-by-10 here and there. I want them to replace it correctly. The whole wharf is just horrible."

The rebuilding effort looks much more comprehensive than in the past. One and perhaps two projects will be so extensive they will force the wharf to close temporarily.

This year, \$500,000 in the proposed 1997-98 city budget would go toward fixing the outer half of the wharf. It would cost another \$500,000 just to fix the side closest to the beach. The city has not decided whether it will replace the part of the wharf closest to the beach for an estimated \$1.5 million

or simply renovate it.

Not every Capitola resident thinks spending this much money is a good idea. "Personally I think the Capitola library is more important," said LaVerne Agler, out walking on the wharf recently. Capitola does not have a library, although one is in the planning stages.

But general enthusiasm appears strong. Wharf restoration was rated as a high priority two years ago in a survey of city residents. Recently elected councilman Tony Gualtieri campaigned on a platform of historic preservation, including wharf protection. One city government group and a second private group formed recently to protect the wharf. The groups are planning a three-day wharf celebration in September, complete with a twilight concert, a history night at Capitola Theater and a historic walking tour with Swift.

That group is filing for non-profit status so it can apply for grant money to benefit the wharf.

But their celebration, and fund raising, is to keep something the same, not to mess with a proven formula. "What you see is what it will always be," said Westman.