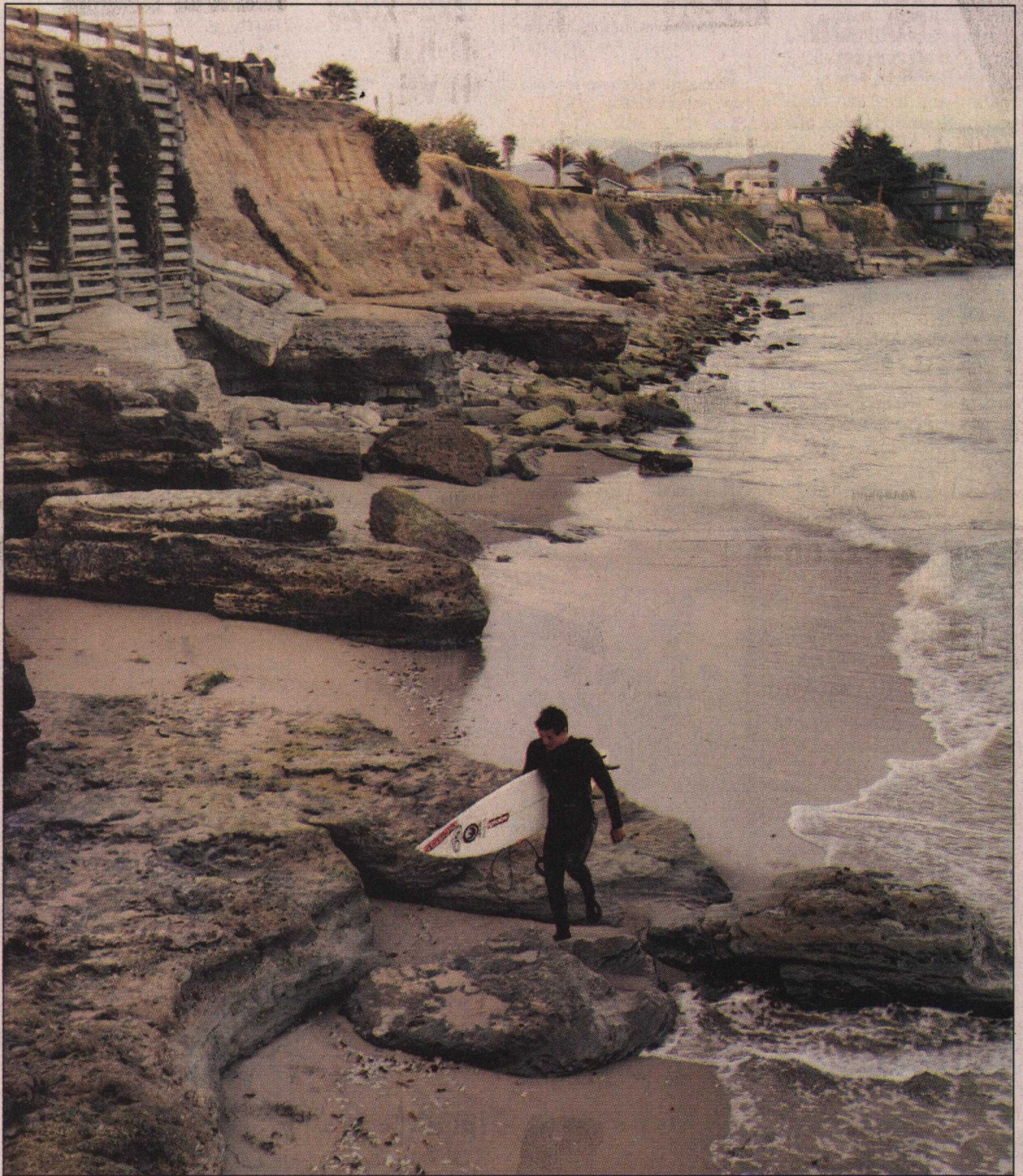


Foes envision rough ride for plan to protect cliff



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

James Manss calls it a day after surfing off Pleasure Point where Santa Cruz County officials want to build a seawall.

Beach erosion SURFERS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS OPPOSE WALL TO SAVE HOMES, BEACH ACCESS

By David L. Beck
Mercury News

At Pleasure Point, where nature has been nibbling at the coastline for eons, a plan to curb the ocean's appetite and save the cliff has opponents fearful for one of the premier surfing spots in California.

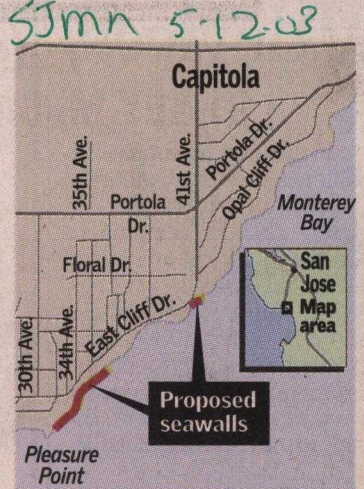
The plan would erect a shaped seawall — an "armoring" — over 1,100 feet of crumbling bluff between 33rd and 36th avenues near Capitola, and it pits environmentalists against public officials over the fate of the local road and

its residents. The Army Corps of Engineers hopes to begin work next summer. Should they?

■ Environmentalists say no. They believe nature should be allowed to take its course, even if it means losing East Cliff Drive and the houses opposite the bluff.

■ Surfers also oppose the seawall, expressing fears that the hardened bluff will affect the waves they cherish.

■ Santa Cruz County officials counter that they have to protect the



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SEAWALL | Battle shapes up over cliff

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homes and the utility lines that run beneath the road, as well as the access to a natural resource that the road provides.

It's not an easy call — not for the Corps of Engineers, which will be taking comments on the armoring and other, less extreme options, until today, and not for the California Coastal Commission, which hopes to rule in August on whether the plan is consistent with the law.

Cliff losing ground

What no one disputes is that the cliff is disappearing at an average rate of a foot a year, and sometimes — as in the wet winter of 1994 — in much bigger chunks. Until then, East Cliff was a two-lane street with a pedestrian path. But too much cliff fell that winter to support the path.

Today, measuring inland from a weedy, irregular cliff top of dubious firmness, there is a seven-foot bike and pedestrian path, wooden horses, a single-lane road, and then a row of beach houses, all overlooking a magnificent panorama of Monterey Bay, where mile-wide waves support hundreds of black-suited surfers at any given time.

The cove at Pleasure Point is the opposite of Malibu, an unkempt patch of cliff top with a few bits of white fencing. Crude paths — “goat trails” — lead downward, gouged into the bluff by years of surfers' feet. The beach is covered with rocks and crumbled concrete.

The surfing community has left its mark. A sign on the lone stairway enunciates “Pleasure Point Etiquette.” (Rule No. 1: “First on wave has right of way.”) “Pack Your Trash,” other signs counsel, and apparently people do. Wetsuit magnate Jack O'Neill's old, three-story green house is at the east end of the cove, protected by a natu-

ral groin of rock and a pile of boulders, or riprap. (O'Neill opposes the seawall.)

Although the Corps of Engineers is offering several alternatives, debate has clustered around the extremes. The Corps' favored alternative is full armoring. Against that is what opponents call “managed retreat” — building nothing, letting the waves recontour the cliff and, if it comes to that, letting them take the road, sewer and water lines and even the houses.

Sierra Club spokesman Mark Massara is “flabbergasted” that the Corps did not consider that alternative. He calls the seawall a “Trojan horse” that “will have a devastating, irreparable impact on the Santa Cruz marine ecosystem, for the rest of our lifetime. And for what? A road?”

County officials disagree, and so does Gary Griggs, a coastal geologist hired to analyze the project. Griggs is director of the Institute of Marine Sciences in Santa Cruz.

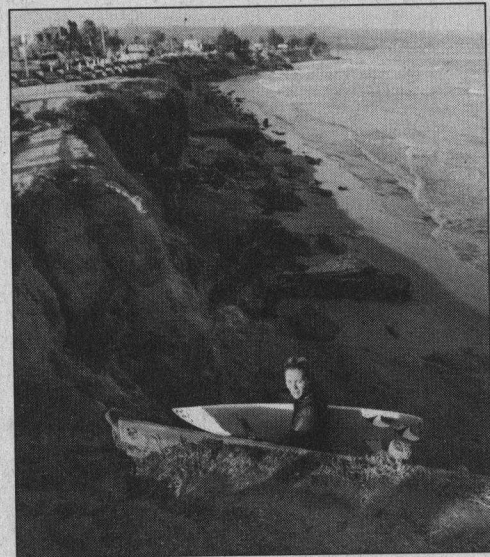
He found the impact of this particular project minimal. “If you decide you need to do something,” said Griggs, “then the project they're proposing is probably the best alternative.”

Given the average erosion of a foot a year, a contoured wall coming out about two feet from the natural surface would merely restore the beach to what it was a couple of years ago, he said.

No effect on surfing

Effect on the waves? “Simply not an issue,” Griggs said. “The break is 400 to 500 feet offshore.”

The arguments take on the color of a class struggle. The houses on East Cliff are mostly small, and not exactly triumphant design statements. But they have what Baidra Murphy, a Realtor and a neighbor, calls “grand ocean views,” and whatever they may have cost 40 years ago, they're worth a lot today.



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Surfer Vanessa Floyd ends her day. Surfers fear a seawall would affect the waves, but county officials counter that it would not.

Christian Fine, a member of the Surfrider Foundation and of the Surfers Environmental Alliance, says that while he's sympathetic to the lives families have built in those houses, “They really don't belong there.”

“It seems silly to build on the edge of an eroding cliff and then expect taxpayer money to protect it,” he said.

But Tom Burns, the Santa Cruz County redevelopment head, thinks that kind of rhetoric obscures the issue. “The thought is that somehow we're doing this to protect an elitist group of property owners,” he said. “We're doing this to protect public resources — the walkway, the road, the sewer, the public's access.”

“I mean, if you let that roadway go, not only will you see piecemeal private coastal protection projects that will affect the use of the beach area over time, but the public's access — an informal, established, coastal bike/walk/run trail — will be gone, and that limits considerably who can actually enjoy that resource.”

Contact David L. Beck at dbeck@mercurynews.com or at (831) 423-0960.