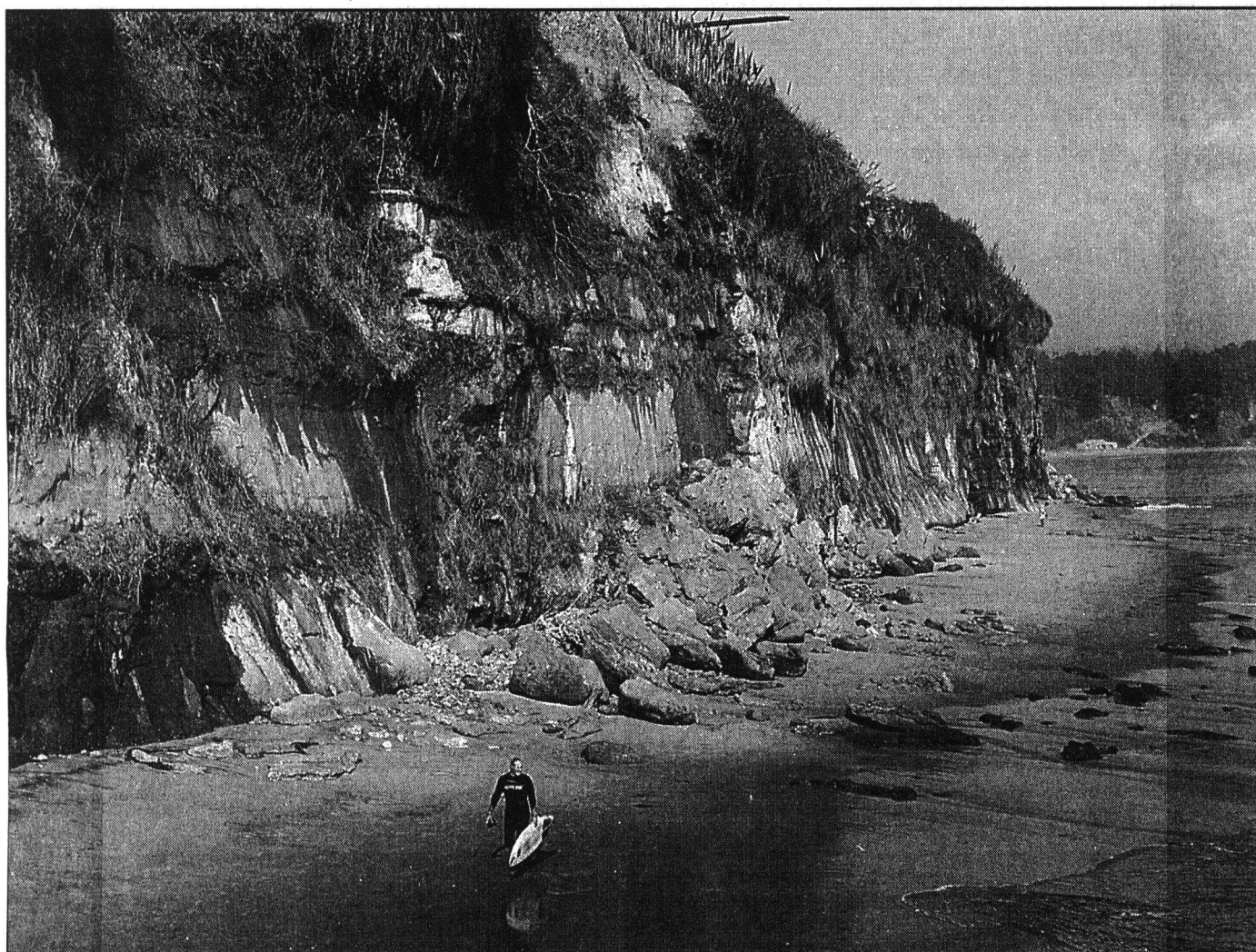


A WALL OF OPPOSITION



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Some Depot Hill residents think a seawall on the beach below their homes would stop future erosion; others, however, say the project would fail and be too costly.

Neighbors split over how to stop Capitola cliff erosion and whether it's even needed

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**
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CAPITOLA — Depot Hill residents who are being asked to pay for a seawall they don't want have been joined in their fight against it by surfers.

The surfers and disgruntled residents contend a proposed 1,250-foot-long seawall for the beach between Capitola and New Brighton State Beach is not only a waste of money but will harm the beach. And, ultimately, the expensive seawall won't stop erosion of the 90-foot cliff, said Tim Ryan, a seawall opponent.

Ryan and the owners of three other homes have sued to get out of the 18-member Depot Hill Geologic Hazard Abatement District. The district, which can assess homeowners, was formed in 1997 with the approval of the Capitola City Council.

Bob Tomaselli, one of five directors of the abatement district, accused the opponents of "trying to stir the pot" to aid their lawsuit.

Ryan said each homeowner is being assessed up to \$20,000 for preliminary studies on the seawall. Actual construction of the wall ultimately could cost up to \$200,000 per homeowner, he said.

Ryan said he doubts the state Coastal

Commission will even approve the wall. A 1998 letter from commission staff said no homes are now threatened and that construction of the seawall may be premature.

The Coastal Commission has recently taken a dim view of seawalls except when a substantial structure is threatened and there are no other less environmentally damaging alternatives, Ryan said.

"We're saying this is ridiculous. Why don't we go to the Coastal Commission now and get a feel for whether they'll approve it" before spending the money, Ryan said.

Opponents invited commission staff to a workshop Wednesday evening to answer questions about seawalls and the Depot Hill proposal, but the staff members bowed out with no explanation, he said.

Tomaselli said the seawall is necessary to keep the ocean from eating away the base of the cliff. In 1983, a chunk of Grand Avenue, which runs atop the cliff, collapsed. And over the years, several apartment buildings in the area have been condemned and others homes have been moved back from the cliff.

Gene Bernald, a Saratoga resident and one of the abatement district directors, bought a home on the hill five years ago,

demolished it, and replaced it with a new home farther back from the cliff. Even though the new house is farther back, Bernald said he wants the seawall.

"I didn't buy the home with the proviso I was going to build a seawall," he said. "But eventually the cliff is going to erode, so it would be nice."

Ryan contends the issue also is about full-time residents and absentee owners. Of the five district directors, only Tomaselli lives full time in the county. The others own vacation homes here, he said. The opponents who have filed the lawsuit live locally.

Besides the cost, Ryan said opponents are concerned the seawall will "armor" the coast and make the beach less accessible to the public. Seawalls also can cause a progressive loss of sand needed to replenish the beach and will cause greater erosion on nearby beaches, he said.

Those concerns are being echoed by Surfers Environmental Alliance members.

"Seawalls have proven to be major mistakes in erosion control," said the alliance's Doug Ardley. "They disrupt the flow of sand, and generally have proven to be very expensive and very temporary fixes," he said.