

**Climate**

Environment

Wildfires



Enormous imported rocks, known as "riprap," has been a tool to arrest coastal erosion along West Cliff Drive for years. Nearly half of the shoreline at West Cliff is now covered with riprap.

(Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

CLIMATE

Saving West Cliff: 'If we decide not to do anything, then you will have nothing'

**BY WALLACE BAINE**Source: [Lookout Santa Cruz](#)

Santa Cruz citizens and neighbors are summoning new energy and vision to "Save West Cliff." The iconic 2.7-mile promenade that presents stunning, unimpeded views of the ocean has meant so much to so many for so long. With climate change now accelerating its challenges,

citizens and the city now also step up their work and advocacy. Next up: a Feb. 13 "community conversation" about West Cliff Drive.

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WALLACE BAINE

There are about 150 parking spaces on West Cliff Drive on the ocean side of the road, all oriented to face the sea. On any given day, of the vehicles parked on West Cliff, a significant percentage — a quarter? a third? more? — are occupied.

Parking a car is usually about leaving that car behind to do something else. But that's not necessarily the case here.

West Cliff Drive is often touted for its many uses and for the thousands who use or access it every day, including joggers, drivers, dog walkers, bicyclists, surfers, sunbathers, beachcombers and various other wanderers along the 2.7-mile promenade that presents stunning, unimpeded views of the ocean.

But West Cliff's psychic and emotional value is even better expressed by all these occupied parked cars. Sure, West Cliff is a destination for people who like to do things. But it's also for people passing their lunch hour, taking a break from a hospital vigil or a dysfunctional family situation, killing time while the traffic lets up, figuring out what to do with their lives. It's for people who just want to veg out, gaze aimlessly into the Pacific, to just be.

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These days, West Cliff is in trouble. And everyone who loves it, everyone with a stake in preserving its future — from the surfers at Steamer Lane to the parked-car contemplators — is being summoned to meet a crisis. The winter of 2022-23 has been a tough one for West Cliff. The [parade of atmospheric-river storms](#) that slammed the California coast in December and January have taken chunks out of the picturesque path along the bluffs. And with the specter of rising sea levels

and more persistent — and more potent — storms in the years ahead thanks to climate change, it's clear that, without some kind of intervention, the evolution on West Cliff is moving in one direction only, the wrong direction.

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That summoning is called "[Save West Cliff](#)," and it's an effort to galvanize neighbors, locals, and visitors to make 2023 a turning point in the history of West Cliff Drive, the moment when Santa Cruz's elected officials, city employees and private citizens all come together to put in motion a creative long-term solution to preserving what makes this stretch of road so extraordinary.

"There's a lot of people who love this place," said Al Ramadan, who spearheaded the "Save West Cliff" effort in the wake of the punishing January storms. "It's more than the road, obviously. If you think of the part that goes all the way from the Dream Inn to Natural Bridges and the swimming zone 300 yards out to sea, if you include all that, it's a remarkable part of the world."

The January storms caused several spots on the walking/bike path along West Cliff to break apart and fall away altogether, compelling the city's public works department to implement [emergency repairs](#), bringing in 200 tons of rock and rerouting the road to [one-way traffic](#) near Mitchell's Cove.

One of the first orders of business for "Save West Cliff," said Ramadan, was to collect names and testimonials from people on why West Cliff is special to them. "Oh, it's everything," he said. "From walking to surfing to biking to

meditation to 'It's my happy place' to 'It's where I come when I'm stressed.' I'm not going to give you the details, but we even got something about children being conceived on It's Beach."

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It's easy enough to gather reasons why West Cliff is awesome. But this "movement," as Ramadan likes to call it, is about launching something grander from those modest starting points, a comprehensive and "multigenerational" plan to not just preserve but even reenvision an enduring West Cliff Drive.

What that means exactly is still to be determined. But Ramadan is not talking small potatoes. He points to such high-profile public-works projects as the [Los Angeles River](#) and the [High Line](#) in New York City, as well as the Presidio and Land's End in San Francisco. The circumstances obviously are different in Santa Cruz, but the idea is not imitation but inspiration.

"[Those projects] are all incredibly inspiring," he said. "And how did they start? With grassroots community groups getting together to say, 'Y'know, we've got an insane asset here.'"



The scenic and beloved bike/walking path along West Cliff Drive is literally vanishing, thanks to continued ocean erosion.

(Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

Nik Strong-Cvetich is the CEO of the Santa Cruz-based Save the Waves Coalition, which brings conservationist efforts and energy to the task of preserving surf breaks around the world. He's also a foundational player in the "Save West Cliff" effort. Evoking the (probably) unavoidable realities of climate change, Strong-Cvetich said that any reimagining of West Cliff should start from the orientation of the future, not the present.

"What is likely to be the long-term status quo [on West Cliff] 50 years from now?" he said. "Let's use that as a starting point, rather than thinking, 'Oh, what does next year look like? And then, what does the year after that look like?' I think that process keeps the issue myopically focused on what's next, instead of what could be."

All that reimagining could very well begin Feb. 13. That's the date when the city will host a [Zoom webinar](#) about the issues facing West Cliff Drive, open to the

public.

The city, of course, is less focused on grand visions 50 years down the road and more focused on more immediate concerns regarding public access to West Cliff for visitors and homeowners. The city has its [own plan](#), the West Cliff Drive Adaptation and Management Plan, passed by the city council in the spring of 2021, now awaiting final approval from the California Coastal Commission, the state agency that exerts control over development and land use along the California coastline.

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The West Cliff plan was years in the making and came at the behest of the Coastal Commission which has leaned on coastal cities to create their own plans to react to likely climate change. Part of its focus is on evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of "armoring," reinforcing eroding cliff faces with sea walls and "riprap," the large boulders imported and placed at the base of the cliffs. Riprap now covers about half of the shoreline along West Cliff Drive, and though it might have some effectiveness in preventing erosion, it limits public access and the plan recommends limiting the addition of new riprap, in preference for more durable sea walls.

Tiffany Wise-West is the sustainability and climate action manager with the city, and one of the authors of the plan. She said the Feb. 13 public meeting is a chance for the city to begin a robust post-storm public conversation about

what's to be done on West Cliff, and that the "Save West Cliff" group is merely one of many stakeholders the city wants to hear from.



West Cliff Drive has a number of "uses" for activities. But a large part of its appeal is as a place to contemplate and reflect.

(Wallace Baine / Lookout Santa Cruz)

"There will be plenty of opportunity for questions and discussions on the near-term emergency response," she said. "And we'll start to scratch the surface on the medium and long term. But we envision this as one of many conversations that will need to take place in light of what has transpired on West Cliff."

Part of that discussion is the possibility of the "one-way-one-lane" proposal, to convert West Cliff Drive into a single-lane one-way street, thus moving the walking/bike path back from the cliff's edge 10 feet or so, and thus (ideally) avoiding many of the spot repairs now being implemented on the recreation path. Wise-West said the city's management plan did not recommend the one-way-one-lane proposal because "we did not have community support for that. But in the light of what's happened, that conversation is being accelerated."

Because of the recent storm damage, some sections of West Cliff have been temporarily converted to one-way, which gives the city a kind of case study for what happens to traffic and parking in the neighborhoods in that case. The one-way idea, said Wise-West, is “not a foregone conclusion at this point.”

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Of course, East Cliff Drive in the Pleasure Point area has faced many of the same challenges in reinforcing the coastal zone against winter storms and potential sea-level rise. Pleasure Point is under the jurisdiction of Santa Cruz County, and county staff served on the plan’s technical advisory board, which also includes a wide range of groups from Save Our Shores to UC Santa Cruz to the Coastal Commission to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The management plan was designed to respond to a series of triggers, specific events that would necessitate action. Wise-West said the January storms hit four of those triggers. “Exceeding even one of them would have indicated that we need to be seriously contemplating and planning for the next step,” she said.

Despite its call to bring the community together to generate ideas, the “Save West Cliff” group isn’t interested in reinventing the wheel. Strong-Cvetich said the city’s management plan is “a really good baseline plan to outline the uses and the most vulnerable pieces of West Cliff.”

Since the storms, “Save West Cliff” has been marshaling significant community power in the names it has recruited to take part in the effort. The group’s founding members list reads like a who’s who in Santa Cruz, featuring high-profile surfers and activists, entrepreneurs and scientists. As many as five ex-mayors of Santa Cruz are on that list, as are several sitting elected officials.

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"This is an inflection point," said Hilary Bryant, one of those former mayors and a primary advocate for "Save West Cliff." "This is a moment when we really have to make some significant decisions. I don't believe we can continue to just patch up these spots that are falling in. There needs to be a more strategic, overarching look at the entire West Cliff environment and we need to think about how we want to protect that important piece of coastline for future generations — or not. That's the other thing. If we decide to not do anything, then we will have nothing."

Bryant walks her dog almost daily on West Cliff. "It used to be the place where I would go to rethink everything that I did on the city council, good, bad or otherwise," she said. Like many in "Save West Cliff" movement, she wants everyone in Santa Cruz to feel an ownership stake in the fate of West Cliff Drive and not have it become a pet project of the affluent homeowners in the area. "That's why we want people to have this conversation," she said. "It shouldn't just be about who's living in the immediately impacted neighborhoods. It's really about everyone that uses West Cliff, for whatever they use it for."

Al Ramadan said "Save West Cliff" is not a fundraising organization, and it's not going to engage in social media. "No Russian bots, no Nextdoor," he said. "We

have to set it up in a way that people can truly have a conversation, be vulnerable, and talk about what we all truly want from all this."

"Community Conversations" on West Cliff Drive will take place Monday, Feb. 13, from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on [Zoom](#). The event is free and open to the public.



WALLACE BAINE



Wallace Baine is Lookout's City Life Correspondent, covering arts, music and culture, as well as the people who make Santa Cruz and neighboring communities tick. He also writes "The Here & Now," a periodic column that offers his take on the news of the day — and the news you'd otherwise miss.

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