



The stretch of West Cliff Drive where a portion of sidewalk collapsed in November. (Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

COAST LIFE

'Managed retreat is on the table': City discusses West Cliff's future, will explore expanding one-way





Santa Cruzans could soon see West Cliff Drive become a one-way street all the way from Bay Street to Woodrow Avenue as city officials begin to seriously consider implementing a managed retreat strategy for the iconic stretch of coastal road. Published 4 Hours Ago



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The City of Santa Cruz is seriously exploring a managed retreat strategy for West Cliff Drive after several sections were <u>damaged by storms</u> and coastal erosion, city officials told a public meeting Monday night.

That includes plans to launch a pilot project for a one-way street by expanding the current one-way section between Woodrow Avenue and Columbia Street all the way to Bay Avenue by the Dream Inn — about a mile of coastal road.

Managed retreat, a process to relocate community infrastructure away from coastlines and other environmentally sensitive areas, has been tossed around by city officials, but never fully considered. In November, the city's sustainability and climate action manager, Tiffany Wise-West, <u>told Lookout the idea of a one-way street was just a concept</u> and the city was still exploring its feasibility.

But on Monday, Wise-West told around 130 residents who gathered online and in person at the Seymour Marine Discovery Center that <u>January's barrage of</u> <u>atmospheric rivers</u> had caused certain triggers — events that point to the need to change or adapt infrastructure — to occur, suddenly breathing new life into the possibility of managed retreat.

2/14/23, 10:31 AM



A sinkhole that opened up on West Cliff Drive on Jan. 5. (Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

In this case, that trigger is substantial erosion leading to the loss of public access in the coastal zone, which had not been expected to happen for another 15 to 30 years, Wise-West said.

"We have this unique opportunity to pilot the one-way that's in place now and understand the implications on neighborhoods," she said. "Managed retreat is on the table, and we have exceeded triggers that indicate we need to be seriously considering it." Advertisement

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However, officials didn't offer a timeline for when that one-way expansion might happen.

The city is also developing a coastal change monitoring network consisting of camera sites, annual drone surveying and community science stations along the road where residents can help observe changes in the coast.

Monday night's meeting largely focused on storm impacts and explaining the <u>West Cliff Drive Adaptation and Management Plan</u>, a variety of projects seeking to armor cliffs, stabilize caves, upgrade drainage systems and bolster existing infrastructure in preparation for continued erosion. The plan has not yet been approved by the California Coastal Commission.

The coming changes will happen through a "roadmap process," which means that the city will build on the West Cliff adaptation plan and, <u>City Manager Matt</u> <u>Huffaker</u> said, facilitate a "robust community engagement process" with the shared goal of securing West Cliff's future.

"Today really just marks one of many opportunities that our community will have to weigh in on the process over the course of the coming weeks and months," he said.



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

Discussion about the future of the iconic Santa Cruz road was revitalized in November <u>when a portion of the walkway collapsed</u> near Columbia Street. The damage added by January's relentless storm systems only reinforced the conversations. And just last week, a part of a cliff jutting out into Steamer Lane <u>fell into the ocean</u> not far from a group of surfers.

Santa Cruz Public Works Director Nathan Nguyen said it's hard to give an exact timeline for when repairs to roads and retaining structures might reach completion, because the city is still working to secure federal assistance. He said he hopes to have some repairs underway this summer or fall, but "we'll have to wait and see how the grant funding programming takes place."

All of this has, in a sense, changed how the city looks at West Cliff Drive's future. The traditional process of planning to execute changes at fixed-point times in the future simply does not allow for ample preparedness, given how unpredictable the coastal climate can be, Wise-West said.

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"We can't rely on planning time horizons to adapt our approaches and infrastructure," she said. "Having a triggers-based approach for the whole stretch of coastline is smarter than making investments too early or too late."

On top of the 100 virtual attendees, around 30 locals attended a quiet watch party at the Seymour Center hosted by the local resident group <u>Save West Cliff.</u> Many of those in attendance said they were open to any number of necessary changes and were anxious to get them off the ground. 'Managed retreat is on the table': City discusses West Cliff's future, will explore expanding one-way - Lookout Local Santa Cruz



(Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

Cameron Ohlson is the visitor experience manager at the Seymour Center but attended the meeting as a private citizen, he said. He understands the difficulty in balancing the interests of private landowners and public space when it comes to fundamentally changing the road, but believes things need to happen sooner rather than later.

"If people don't figure out this common community base to put pressure on the city to make change, I'm scared that eventually it'll be just homes, driveways and nowhere for public use," he said.

Josie Bleeker, a UC Santa Cruz graduate student studying molecular biology, said the conversation around turning West Cliff Drive into a one-way street should have happened much earlier.



"Everyone I've talked to that critically thinks says this should have been made into a one-way or no cars a long time ago," she said. "I feel like the houses have to literally fall into the ocean for something to happen."

Bleeker added that as the climate crisis worsens, she believes West Cliff won't be the only part of the city subject to damage, and that the city needs to act proactively rather than reactively: "It's gonna be really bad, and I don't think people realize that yet."

Hilary Bryant, former Santa Cruz mayor and a Save West Cliff leader, said that as devastating as the storms were, they've provided the city with a timely opportunity to prepare the entire road for the future.

"It's not just happening at one section — it's all the way around, and we rarely have this kind of federal funding opportunity," she said. "So as awful as it is, let's be really thoughtful and strategic about how we look at this. I think it'd be a disservice to just look at the most damaged sections."



Max Chun is a locally grown reporter with an eye for community activism, human interest stories, and anything Santa Cruz.

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