

A Dent in Solana Beach's Armor

Seawall is repeatedly denied for cliff house called a 'poster child' for managed retreat.



Two people walk past a section of bluff without a seawall near 245 Pacific Ave. in Solana Beach at low tide Friday. (Eduardo Contreras/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

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SOLANA BEACH, Calif. — This city has a weak spot in its armor, and the California Coastal Commission is refusing to let homeowners fix it.

Most of Solana Beach's seaside homes sit nearly 90 feet above the beach behind a carefully crafted, faux-rock seawall that protects the base of the cliffs from the erosion of the surf.

At high tide, Solana Beach has no beach. The waves crash against the concrete walls almost everywhere except Fletcher Cove, which the town fathers carved out from the bluffs with fire hoses during a development boom in the early 1920s.

But on the northern end of town, there's a 50-foot gap where one house has no seawall — and on Sept. 10, 2020, the Coastal Commission board again denied the property owners permission to build one. Only houses in place before the state passed its Coastal Act in 1972 are allowed to build or replace seawalls.

Commission staffers will present additional information at the agency's virtual meeting this week, but the board's position is unlikely to change.

Commissioner Roberto Uranga of Long Beach said at the September meeting that the Solana Beach house is a "poster child" for managed retreat. The often-controversial policy advocates moving buildings away from vulnerable spots on the coast and letting nature take its course.

Other commissioners said it was disturbing that the property that would get the most benefit from the seawall, 245 Pacific Ave., was not included in the recent application. Instead, it was submitted by owners of the neighboring properties to the north and south.

"It just smells funny to me," said Commissioner Mike Wilson, a resident of Eureka and member of the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors.

The Coastal Commission and environmental groups such as the Surfrider Foundation oppose the construction of seawalls, often called armoring, because studies show they accelerate beach erosion.

Also, in cities such as Solana Beach, homeowners build their seawalls on public property outside their lot, essentially using land that doesn't belong to them for their personal benefit.

The home at 245 Pacific Ave. is an unusual case.

Built in the 1990s to replace an earlier house on the site, the structure has a deed restriction that prohibits construction of a seawall. Despite that and the Coastal Act policies, the owners have applied repeatedly for a seawall, and the commission has denied it.

Neighbors on both sides of the denied seawall, whose homes were built in the 1950s, also want to plug the 50-foot gap in their coastal armor. Without a solid wall, the sea, wind and rain will eat away the bluff through the notch, destroying the cliffs that support their multimillion-dollar ocean-view homes.

The houses are on small lots and set back just 10 to 20 feet from the street, so there's no room for any of them to be moved or rebuilt farther from the cliff.

One of the houses, at 241 Pacific, is just 3 feet from the edge, according to a commission staff report. The primary structure of the house at 245 Pacific is a little more than 22 feet away, but anyone standing on the beach below can look up and see that the deck hangs out over the edge.

Coastal bluffs recede at the average rate of 6 inches annually in San Diego County. The Coastal Commission requires a minimum setback of 40 feet from the bluff's edge. So, absent any armoring, a structure built in the 1950s or '60s would have lost more than half of its backyard by now.

Seawalls protect only the base of the cliff, and in Solana Beach the walls are about 35 feet high. The application for 245 Pacific also requested permits to install a "geogrid" structure, to protect the face of the bluff for an additional 40 feet above the seawall.

Although the base of the bluff is a relatively solid sandstone, above that is a 10-foot layer of "clean sand." That layer of sand in the middle of the bluff is especially vulnerable to erosion.

"Once exposed, [the sand] is susceptible to windblown erosion and continued sloughing as the sand dries out and loses the capillary tension that initially held the materials together," the commission's staff report says.

"Geotechnical reports ... have stated that minor disturbances such as gentle sea breezes, landing birds or vibrations from low-flying helicopters can be sufficient triggers of small- or large-volume bluff collapses."

Once the middle level of sand falls away, the terraced deposits of the upper bluff are no longer supported. Something as minor as traffic vibration can cause a sudden collapse.

Surfrider's representatives say the property owners were well aware of the danger when they chose to rebuild at the edge of the bluff in 1996.

"By 2001 they were already asking for, and denied, a notch infill" to plug a hole in the bluff, said Kristen Brinner, a Solana Beach resident and Surfrider volunteer, at the September board meeting. "In 2014 and 2019, they also applied for seawalls and were denied. This is all a part of a pattern of games they have been playing with the property ... for over 15 years."

Anders Aannestad, an attorney for the property owners in the most recent permit application, said the request is not a game.

There is no alternative to the seawall, and the public would benefit as well, Aannestad said. The threat of a bluff collapse endangers anyone on the beach.

"This type of gap creates a deadly alley that the city of Solana Beach has had to close off to avoid a repeat of the kind of tragedy we saw in Encinitas," he said. Three women were killed when a bluff collapsed on them at Grandview Beach on Aug. 2, 2019.

"It does not make sense to put the public at risk and lose beach area," said Aannestad.

Surfrider has called for the immediate removal of the house at 245 Pacific, stating it is "clearly in an unsafe location." But the Coastal Commission staff has stated that the conditions do not yet meet the specifications of the 1996 deed restrictions.

The deed requires that once the bluff recedes to within 10 feet of the primary structure, any portions of the building that are seaward of the 40-foot setback must be removed, according to the staff report.

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