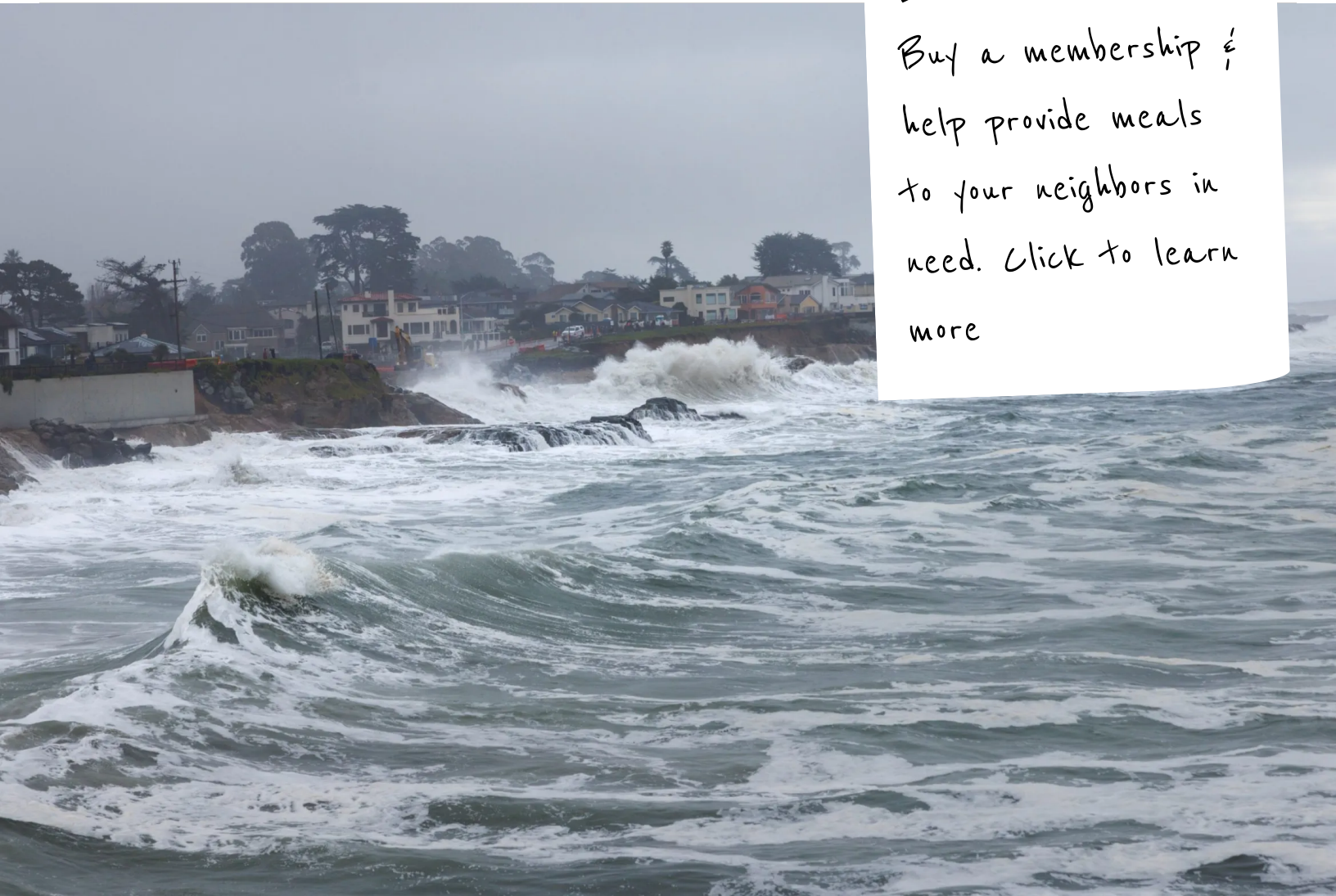


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West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz took another pounding Dec. 28. Credit: Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz

POLITICS & POLICY

One year later, Save West Cliff mobilizes around four visions for the future of West Cliff Drive



BY WALLACE BAINE

12 hours ago

Quick Take

The community effort Save West Cliff was established in early 2023, and since then, it has published a book, galvanized community support and engaged with the City of Santa Cruz to get serious about preserving West Cliff Drive.



UPDATE

What you need to know now

These days, Al Ramadan is thinking about the '70s — that is, the 2070s.

The tech entrepreneur owns a home on Santa Cruz's iconic West Cliff Drive, and a year ago, in the wake of dramatic damage of West Cliff from storm-related ocean swells, Ramadan took a leadership role in a community task force called Save West Cliff. As he sees it, the guiding principle of the effort is to look ahead not to next winter, or 10 years from now, but 50 years down the road.

“Unless we have a vision for what West Cliff should be in 2072 or 2073,” he said, “we’re wasting our time. It’s a futile exercise. It’s one where we get into this cycle of storms coming in, smashing the road, smashing the cliffs, smashing our recreation areas. We wait around for the feds to come in and supply money, and then we do emergency repairs. Rinse and repeat. That’s not a solution.”

Last winter, we told you about [the beginnings](#) of the Save West Cliff effort that emerged after the worst of the 2022-23 atmospheric rivers had caused enough damage to take a bite out of the famed walk/bike path along the coast and close a section of West Cliff Drive.

FROM FEBRUARY 2023

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

Among the relevant events of 2023 was a visit to Bookshop Santa Cruz by journalist Rosanna Xia, the author of a new book titled “California Against the Sea” that outlined specifically what West Cliff Drive and other [vulnerable areas along the California coast are up against](#).

Ramadan, having read Xia’s book, was particularly moved by one of her passages: “We’re the first generation to really feel the impacts of climate change, and we’re likely the last to do anything about it.”

The first order of business of Save West Cliff was to galvanize public support for a long-term solution that will preserve what locals believe is special about West Cliff. A core team of activists came together including two former Santa Cruz mayors, Hilary Bryant and Donna Meyers, conservation activist Nik Strong-Cvetich, [UC Santa Cruz marine geologist Gary Griggs](#), surfing entrepreneur Bob Pearson, and [pro surfer Shaun Burns](#).

“That’s the starting point,” said Ramadan, “and then there’s a broader group that spans out from there. We have people, from a social psychologist who has studied [activist] movements at Stanford [University], all the way through to people who are willing to bring a truck down and start moving rocks around.”



West Cliff Drive in the immediate aftermath of last winter’s storm surge. Credit: Hillary Ojeda / Lookout Santa Cruz

On top of that, the group’s website lists more than [500 community members](#), many of them prominent names, who support the effort, as well as [partnerships](#) with businesses and other institutions.

Part of the effort to engage the larger Santa Cruz community was to publish a book, and last summer, Save West Cliff did just that, releasing a big [coffee-table book](#) titled “West Cliff: Beloved and Iconic, a Visual

Record.” Published in partnership with the McHenry Library at UCSC, the book provides a visual history of West Cliff Drive with photos dating back to the mid-19th century, taken from balloons and airplanes. It also contains documentation of precisely what happened in January 2023 on West Cliff.

“There’s one particular image in there,” said Ramadan of a satellite image from last winter, “which sets all this in context. It’s a huge hurricane sitting off the coast of California. It’s called a bomb cyclone and its diameter is bigger than the West Coast of America itself. When you see this picture, it’ll blow your head off.”

Next, the group wanted to engage the city, which had developed its own plan, the West Cliff Drive Adaptation and Management Plan, in the spring of 2021. The city held a public webinar on West Cliff Drive in February and presented its vision, called the [West Cliff Roadmap](#), that largely dovetailed with the Save West Cliff idea of developing a lasting, long-term solution. More meetings, of the Save West Cliff activists and the city, followed.

FROM SEPTEMBER 2023

With some West Cliff-area repairs still a year out, Westside residents push for better traffic safety measures

The city is now on board with the 50-year vision frame, and as 2024 dawns, the city has developed four possible outcomes on what West Cliff might look like in 2073. At a community meeting on Dec. 5, the city presented the four options, now under consideration. Those options are:

- Hold the Line, which is to continue to protect West Cliff essentially as it’s been protected in the past, with various methods of hard armoring, sea walls and rip rap, the large boulders imported and placed at the base of the cliffs. The upshot is that access to West Cliff’s beaches is likely to become even more restricted because this option entails committing hard-armoring among the entire 2.7-mile length of West Cliff. In 50 years’ time, it means there will be maybe a few “pocket beaches,” but accessibility is likely to be limited and even those will continue to erode away.
- Natural Feature Restoration, which includes installing an intricate some kind of offshore infrastructure to maintain the sands on the beaches and protect the cliffs and beaches of West Cliff from the worst of the ocean swells during storm events with in-water walls and other barriers, and restoring the marine coastal environment to something like it was a hundred years ago. Considering the [California Coastal Commission’s power](#) and the fact that Monterey Bay is a national marine sanctuary, the regulatory aspect of this plan is daunting.
- Park Only. The “let nature take its course” option means stopping the hard-armoring activity, buying out property owners under the greatest risk of losing their homes, and maybe even relocating the [lighthouse/surfing museum building](#). It would also mean the end of most vehicle access and West Cliff

Drive as a road, turning the whole area into a park with pedestrian and bicycle traffic only. Also, of course, parking along West Cliff would be eliminated, and some other parking options would have to be developed.

- Hybrid, an approach that preserves at least one-way, westbound vehicle traffic on West Cliff Drive, along with separate paths for pedestrians and bicyclists, and parking more or less where it exists today. This means some coastal protection measures, abandoned in the Park Only plan, would have to still be maintained.

The city solicited reactions and ideas from the public on the four-option plan in a (now closed) survey after the public meeting and is going through the more than 200 responses to the plan.

The costs of these plans have not yet been worked out, but Ramadan for one is not interested in painting a rosy picture on the price tag. “You’re looking at a billion dollars, man,” he said.

What’s more, none of the options are ideal: “Every single person in that room [during the meeting] has to give up something that they want. That’s just the reality of where we are now.”



A portion of West Cliff Drive was closed to traffic (lower portion of photo) or made one-way (upper portion) after suffering storm damage in January 2023. Credit: Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz

Gary Griggs, perhaps the foremost authority of what's happening geologically on West Cliff, said that the road ahead for Save West Cliff is likely to be challenging. Public engagement in the question is likely to be limited, as it is in many municipal efforts of this scope and complexity, leaving behind persistent questions about whether the chosen option is really what the larger public wants. Even then, outside the harrowing costs involved, the regulatory process could be crippling.

FROM JANUARY 2023

'I have never seen anything this dramatic': Santa Cruz's most-tenured ocean observer in awe of storm damage

"The Coastal Commission is a huge obstacle," said Griggs, who helped develop the city's 2021 West Cliff plan, which outlined management strategies and challenges for maintaining West Cliff on a 10- to 15-year

time line. “[The 2021 plan] went to the Coastal Commission for approval. And they sat on it until January [of 2023]. So, it’s really hard to know who exactly is in the driver’s seat.”

Save West Cliff and the city also face a daunting public-relations challenge in convincing Santa Cruzans who aren’t property owners in the area that spending such an astronomical sum is also in their interests. On any given day, of course, there are hundreds of people who use West Cliff and who do not necessarily live in the immediate vicinity. But efforts with the magnitude of this one need deep and broad community support. But, even with an issue as galvanizing as providing housing, that broad public support has often been elusive in Santa Cruz.

Yet, even 50 years is a narrow window, certainly when you’re talking to a geologist. “In the long term — depending on what you think of as the long term — there’s absolutely nothing we can do to hold back the Pacific Ocean,” said Griggs. “So anything we do has to be seen as temporary. This is a massive issue that [is] affecting every coastal community in California, and frankly, the megacities of the world.”

Still, Ramadan feels that Santa Cruz has to act to preserve a unique interface with the ocean not only in Santa Cruz County, but on the West Coast.

“This is a 50-year plan,” he said. “So we can’t do anything tomorrow morning. There’s a whole bunch of regulatory approvals we need. There’s a whole bunch of financial instruments we need to put in place. There’s a lot that has to happen for us to achieve that vision. But at least we have a vision, so that we can say to our grandkids, ‘Yes, we absolutely played a leadership role in bringing together the community around a shared vision. Nobody liked it completely, but 70% of the people liked it enough, so, kids and grandkids, this is what we imagined for 2073.’”

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