

OPINION FROM COMMUNITY VOICES

# *Santa Cruz is ignoring surfers in city's climate resilience plan – and it's missing the top threat to West Cliff Drive*

BY NAT YOUNG, PETER MEL, ANTHONY RUFFO AND DEBORAH MADDOCK ELSTON

4 hours ago



Steamer Lane, one of Santa Cruz's famed surf breaks, along West Cliff Drive. Credit: Ryan Chachi Craig

## **Quick Take**

Surfers know the ocean's tendencies and temperaments better than anyone and should be part of the city's climate resilience planning process, argue Santa Cruz surfing legends Nat Young, Peter Mel and Anthony Ruffo, along with neighborhood organizer Deborah Maddock Elston. Instead, they are being left out – as are any mention of west swells and bomb cyclones. Here, they push to know why and say the city is not doing enough to plan for a climate-resilient future for West Cliff Drive, the Beach Flats and Santa Cruz surf culture.

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The City of Santa Cruz continues to ignore surfers in its attempt to make West Cliff Drive more climate resilient.

This is inexplicable, since surfers know the ocean and its tendencies in a way planners and academics who don't spend time in the water don't.

The city's newest plan – the hazard mitigation and climate adaption plan – disregards threats surfers know viscerally – the dangers of west swells and bomb cyclones.

West swells can be huge – think 40-foot waves. They originate from storms in the North Pacific Ocean and Alaska and hit Santa Cruz in the winter. They are surfers' dreams – especially on Santa Cruz's west-facing beaches – but they also can be dangerous, as happened last winter when storms decimated our community. Most of the damage usually occurs between Mitchell's Cove Beach and Lighthouse Point. A bomb cyclone – is a rapidly intensifying storm that brings strong winds, large waves and coastal flooding. It's like a regular storm, but on steroids.

**WEST CLIFF DRIVE'S FUTURE: [Find more Lookout news and opinion coverage here](#)**

[The city's plan](#) is a massive tome authored by staff climate planners. It's 227 pages long. That's 13,023 paragraphs, 71,314 words about the hazards facing West Cliff Drive, the Beach Flats and the city of Santa Cruz.

Yet, in all that verbiage, the word “swell” shows up only three times.

Yes, you read that correctly. Three times.

There is no mention of a west swell. No mention of a northwest swell. No mention of a long-period swell. No mention of a bomb cyclone.

Repeat. No mention.

Which is ironic because experts, including [Gary Griggs](#), distinguished professor of earth and planetary sciences at UC Santa Cruz, who is known for his work on coastal hazards, and [Curt Storlazzi](#), a research geologist and oceanographer at the U.S. Geological Survey, who focuses on hydrodynamics, sediment transport and geomorphology, attribute 76% of the damage to our coastlines to [El Niño years and predominant west swells](#).

We – three surfers and a neighborhood advocate – are writing this because we and dozens of other community members whom we represent are worried about this lack of foresight, this inexplicable omission.

We’ve tried to talk to the city. We’ve tried to get surfers placed on boards. But the city continues to ignore us. We had hoped a Tuesday community meeting to talk about the city’s plan would be a chance for us to be heard. We were wrong again.

At the meeting, we heard that of the 43 projects proposed for the West Cliff plan, four are of highest priority, but the city can fund only two – a managed retreat at 800 West Cliff Dr. and revetment repair (retaining walls and barriers like the 900 block of West Cliff Drive and Bethany Curve).

As we all know, hazard mitigation means reducing the impact of disasters before they occur. It involves identifying potential weaknesses, understanding vulnerabilities and developing long-term risk-reduction strategies.

The city has to do this. The [California Coastal Commission](#) and federal laws require it and provide a clear [risk-assessment framework](#) outlined in Table 4.0 of the city’s plan.



By omitting west swells and bomb cyclones – their history, impact and possible future effects on our community – the city [has failed this assessment](#). The planners, we believe, are leaving the community vulnerable to the destructive force of west swells and bomb cyclones. By neglecting these significant threats, the plan jeopardizes the safety and well-being of residents, visitors and property owners along West Cliff Drive and the Beach Flats as well as tourists visiting our region.

Every surfer, and there are thousands of them in our town, knows that long-period, west swells are the existential threat to West Cliff, the Beach Flats and the rest of our coastline.

They always have been, always will be.

Griggs, Storlazzi and other experts have been [telling us this](#) for decades.



Nat Young airing it out at Steamer Lane. Credit: Kenan Chan

So why doesn't the city know it? How can the biggest hazard be left out of the city's 200-plus-page report?

It's a (sick) joke.

We pay climate experts with doctoral degrees to write all this stuff and they don't even acknowledge the biggest risk to our coastline?

Why?

And why have surfers been shut out of the process? There are no surfers on the "planning team" and the climate action plan (CAP) project manager never involved the surfing community in the plans.

Surfers aren't the only ones shut out. Here's a list of local organizations with clear interest and expertise left out of the process:

- Save the Waves Coalition.
- West Cliff Drive & Recreation Coalition.
- Santa Cruz Board Riders.
- Santa Cruz Longboard Union.
- Santa Cruz Surfing Club Preservation Society.

This is not the first time this has happened.

The city has a habit of leaving folks out. Does anyone remember the [West Cliff Drive Adaptation and Management plan](#) from 2019-20? This was another example of how the city left out some of the most knowledgeable stakeholders in the community largely because their opinions did not align with those of the project managers.

When will the city embrace our knowledgeable surf community?

Members of this community have spent 50 years in the ocean studying swells, bathymetry, sand movement, currents and wind. Literally a lifetime of fieldwork. They might not have Ph.D.s but they have lived experience that academics and the city could use.

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## SURFONOMICS

### **The value of a wave: Can Santa Cruz surfing be saved from climate change?**

Don't believe the surfers? Read this [New York Times article](#) about the California megastorm experts believe is bound to hit.

Sadly, four months after that article was published, a giant west swell, fueled by a bomb cyclone, [hit Santa Cruz on Jan. 5, 2023](#). It blew up West Cliff Drive, our parks and our access (the road/pedestrian path is still closed). Here are some reminders of the [sights and sounds of that storm](#).

If you happened to walk along West Cliff in the past week, you probably saw [these waves breaking over Its Beach](#).

Or you might have heard [reports Wednesday](#) that at least one person is dead and hundreds of thousands are without power as a bomb cyclone slams Washington state and British Columbia. It's [heading to us this week](#) and will dump powerful rain.

One thing we are sure of: The next west swell is coming and we aren't ready.

The city needs to do more to include surfers in the planning and think about the potential impact to this treasured part of Santa Cruz life.

Right now, we don't see how the city's short-term maintenance projects provide a pathway to a future where West Cliff remains accessible to all and our surf ecosystems survive in the face of bigger and stronger swells and storms driven by climate change.

We want to see it before it's too late.

*Nat Young is a professional surfer and Santa Cruz native known for his powerful surfing style and consistent performances on the World Surf League (WSL) tour.*

*Peter Mel, a renowned big-wave surfer, was born in Capitola and moved to Santa Cruz shortly afterward. He is known for his fearless approach to massive waves and his signature style. He's a WSL Big Wave Tour champion and has made significant contributions to the sport of surfing.*

*Anthony Ruffo is one of the legends of Steamer Lane and one of the best backside surfers ever. He is a past champion of the Coldwater Classic and former professional surfer.*

*Deborah Maddock Elston is a neighborhood advocate and founder of Santa Cruz Neighbors.*

*All authors are members of the West Cliff Drive and Recreation Coalition, a grassroots group of residents determined to preserve West Cliff Drive. It includes Santa Cruz Board Riders Club, Santa Cruz Neighbors and neighborhoods of the lower Westside. All are working to preserve two-way accessibility for cyclists, vehicles and pedestrians.*