



A stretch of West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz between Columbia Street and Woodrow Avenue has been under repair since storm damage in early 2023. Credit: Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz

POLITICS & POLICY

Santa Cruz City Council puts one-way West Cliff pilot project on hold



BY MAX CHUN

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Quick Take

The Santa Cruz City Council voted against a one-way West Cliff Drive pilot project Tuesday, saying that the community and the council need more time before making a major decision on the matter. Councilmember Shebreh Kalantari-Johnson introduced a motion with alternative next steps, which passed unanimously.

The Santa Cruz City Council put a one-way West Cliff Drive pilot project on hold at its Tuesday meeting, saying that the community and council need more time to come to a decision after dozens of nearby residents spoke out against the project.

Councilmembers voted unanimously against approving a plan to turn all of West Cliff Drive into a one-way street. Instead, they backed an alternate plan put forward by Shebreh Kalantari-Johnson that asked city staff to return to the council by the end of the year with answers to big community questions surrounding neighborhood impacts, traffic routing and how much clifftop space the community needs.

PREVIOUSLY

Carmageddon: A look at West Cliff's 50-year vision — including a one-way road

The vote prevents city staff from applying for a \$3.5 million state grant to fund the design and implementation of a two-year project to turn West Cliff Drive into a one-way street. That application would have been due in June. Had the city applied and won the grant, staff said they were planning to launch the one-way pilot project in fall 2025 at the same time they expected to finish repairs to the Bethany Culvert, where the road is currently closed to car traffic in both directions.

A stretch of the coastal road between Columbia Street and Woodrow Avenue has been open to only westbound traffic since suffering storm damage in January 2023, and the section between Woodrow Avenue and Almar Avenue has been closed to automobile traffic entirely. The city has been working to reopen the stretch of West Cliff drive between Columbia Street and Woodrow Avenue to two-way traffic.



A rendering of West Cliff Drive with one-way westbound car traffic and separate pedestrian and bike paths. Credit: City of Santa Cruz

Residents living on the streets that have received the bulk of traffic diverting around West Cliff Drive since the closures — such as Oxford Way, Pelton Avenue, Alta Avenue and Almar Avenue — say they have seen much higher traffic volumes than ever before. That prompted more than [70 households in that area to sign a petition last fall](#), calling for the city to remove the cul-de-sacs on Oxford Way and Alta Avenue, reopening the streets to through traffic.

Kalantari-Johnson said figuring out how to approach West Cliff Drive is difficult and that she has “lost a lot of sleep” over it. She added that she would support a one-way pilot project in the future, but now is not the time.

“We need to have a robust engagement process with the neighbors that will be impacted, because the reality is they will be impacted,” she said. “And they will continue to be.”

Councilmember Sandy Brown said she heard too many people say they were “blindsided” by what they viewed as a hasty decision to begin moving toward a one-way West Cliff Drive so soon.

“To me, the real issue is that we need to get to a place where that is not how many people in our community and in those impacted neighborhoods feel,” she said. “It is a missed opportunity with the funding, but there

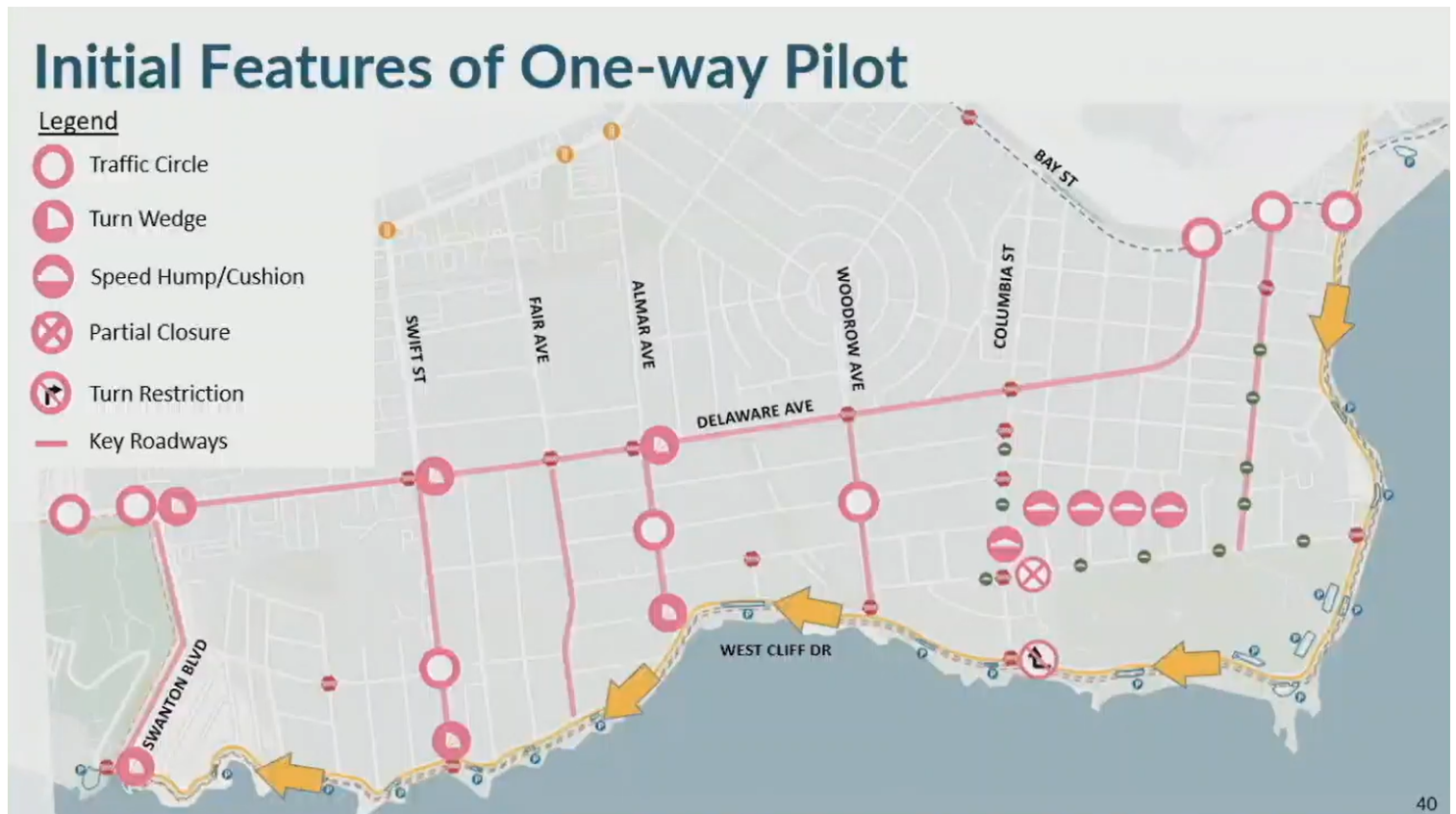
are a lot of missed opportunities, unfortunately, in planning and policymaking.”

The vote on the one-way pilot project was part of the city’s 50-year vision for West Cliff Drive. That plan, which has been in the works since **last May**, builds off of several public engagement sessions the city held to offer a comprehensive, high-level look at what the community wants West Cliff to look like in 50 years and how residents wish to use the road in the future. The 77-page document is intended to provide an outline for the city to seek resources and funding for future projects along the road, and to plan ways to promote coastal resilience against the effects of climate change.

The draft shows the city’s vision to transition from two-way vehicle traffic on West Cliff Drive to one-way westbound traffic and a wider, dedicated bicycle and pedestrian path on what is now the eastbound lane.

City councilmembers unanimously adopted the 50-year plan Tuesday, with the exception of the pilot project. They asked staff to come back to the council by the end of year with a list of priorities for the first 10 years of the 50-year roadmap and to begin studying potential threats caused by ongoing erosion around Lighthouse Point, along with possible solutions.

The council also voted to create an ad hoc committee made up of Santa Cruz Mayor Fred Keeley, along with Kalantari-Johnson and Councilmember Renée Golder, who represent Districts 3 and 6, respectively, which encompass the lower Westside neighborhoods affected by the road closure. The committee will come up with priorities and neighborhood engagement commitments for the first decade of the 50-year plan and will also develop a charter for two other committees: a sustainability and resiliency committee and a West Cliff implementation committee.



Possible options for traffic calming measures in impacted neighborhoods, assuming a one-way West Cliff Drive heading eastbound. Credit: City of Santa Cruz

City Transportation Manager Matt Starkey told the meeting that “the time to act is now,” and that the city needs to be proactive, as it is still recovering from 2023’s winter storms.

“To implement our vision, we need to start today, because it’s going to take a lot of time, a lot of funding, and a lot of collaboration and compromise to turn this vision into a reality,” he said.

Transportation Planner Claire Gallogly presented the plans for the one-way pilot project, which was met with boos from spectators in the council chambers. She said the city would install traffic control measures in the nearby neighborhoods, including traffic circles, turn wedges and speed humps.

Gallogly added that staff would commit to returning to the council every six months with data on the number of people biking, walking and using vehicles in the area. She also said staff could, if necessary, adjust the one-way after its two-year pilot iteration.

“Something unique and special about this grant is that we would return to council for your direction on what to do,” she said. “That gives us enough time to test this, to get people used to the change in behavior, and to really be able to feel it out.”

OPINION FROM COMMUNITY VOICES

Are West Cliff neighbors ready for the influx of traffic if 50-year 'vision' is approved by city council Tuesday? I don't think so.

But those reassurances were not enough for the community members who packed the council chambers. In about 2½ hours of public comment, many opponents raised concerns about traffic impacts on nearby neighborhoods, disappointment with what they believe was insufficient public engagement by the city before Tuesday's meeting, and the feeling that city staff's plans do not accurately reflect what Santa Cruzans want.

Some argued that a survey of 1,120 people in December 2023 and January 2024 showing over 60% of citywide respondents in favor of a one-way is flawed because it did not include all neighborhoods that would be affected by traffic. The surveys showed support for turning West Cliff Drive into a one-way thoroughfare was lower among nearby residents than the citywide average, with about 48% supporting the change.

Pelton Avenue resident Don Iglesias said he appreciates city staff's work, but that the one-way pilot project was "moving way too fast." He urged the city council to keep West Cliff open to two-way traffic for the immediate future.

"Thousands of cars are now driving through the neighborhood all day long creating a dangerous situation for neighbors who were told by staff on multiple occasions that West Cliff would be restored to two-way traffic," he said. "Feeling blindsided that the staff's chasing grant funding for a one-way pilot before developing an implementation plan."

RESIDENT CONCERNS

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

Lower Westside resident Cathy Stefanki said there needs to be a stronger action plan for a one-way, should it be implemented. She said the current iteration is causing serious safety issues in the adjacent neighborhoods.

"With just this temporary closure and traffic rerouted through the neighborhoods, we've seen drastic safety and equity issues," she said. "Even neighbors are driving to the parks with their kids because it's not safe on the street to get there in a stroller or coaster bicycle."

Longtime Santa Cruzan and professional surfer Richard Schmidt argued that global warming and erosion "have nothing to do with a one-way," and said he believes a one-way street will lead to people driving longer

distances collectively, adding to carbon emissions. He added that he thinks that many lower Westside residents did not know that the city council would be voting on the pilot project Tuesday.

“Please take a pause on this process so the community can digest and respond to this one-way pilot proposal, which is kind of sprung on us,” he said. “Unfortunately, a lot of my neighbors have no idea what is happening.”



West Cliff Drive remains closed between Woodrow and Almar avenues, with repairs still perhaps a year away. Credit: Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz

Al Ramadan, a leader of resident group [Save West Cliff](#), said he wants the city council to move forward with the 50-year vision — but to maintain two-way traffic to start.

“There are many unanswered questions — how much space do we actually have to work with? How much room do we need to meet our collective needs? What are the likely impacts on local and city streets?” Ramadan asked. “These questions need to be answered before meaningful change can be proposed.”

Although most public commenters voiced opposition, supporters also shared their thoughts. Many said improving bicycle and pedestrian safety and promoting alternative modes of transportation are of the utmost importance.

Maddie Ortenblad, who grew up in Santa Cruz and now works on Swift Street, said that improved alternative transportation options and getting ahead of climate change make a one-way West Cliff Drive appealing.

“I feel there’s not a safe way for me to currently get to my workplace, and while I was in high school, I felt similarly,” she said. “I think we need to recognize that climate change is real and happening, and this is a great opportunity for us to get ahead and open up more spaces for people to feel safe while we think about climate change and greenhouse gas emissions.”

City Planning Commissioner Pete Kennedy, who lives on the lower Westside, said he thinks it’s imperative that the city adjust its corridors for different modes of transit in the face of climate change.

“I’ve made the decision that I’m OK with more traffic and impacts because I believe it’s going to give my kids and their kids a better chance to live,” he said. “I suggest we study this as soon as possible and get our butts on the road to rethinking our transportation mentality.”

Piet Canin, the strategic program and development director for nonprofit Ecology Action, called the tug-of-war between a one-way and a two-way a hard decision, but the possible benefits for community health and addressing climate change make a one-way favorable. He said he believes people will bike and walk more with safer infrastructure.

“This is a pilot project, and it gives time to test out how a bike path could work, its impact on the neighbors, and be able to evaluate how that could work,” he said. “That [current] path has been inadequate for decades for all the users that it gets and it doesn’t really work as an effective active transportation corridor.”

After hours of discussion, Keeley supported Kalantari-Johnson’s motion, and said he believes it allows the city to move forward with its vision while setting realistic priorities for implementation and “taking a bit more time on some portions of it.”

“It allows us to move forward on all fronts, but some fronts have a loop in them to come back for more thought, consideration and deliberation,” Keeley said. “I do think it is right to take more time on this to include more voices and go deeper.”

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