

Capitola City Council

Agenda Report

Meeting: October 23, 2025

From: Public Works Department

Subject: Grand Avenue Pathway



Recommended Action: Receive a report on the Grand Avenue Pathway and provide direction to staff as needed.

Background: The Grand Avenue Pathway has long been a valued public access route and part of the California Coastal Trail. Ongoing bluff retreat has compromised the safety and continuity of the path for decades, requiring closure of multiple segments and repeated repairs.

History

- 1980s: Portions of Grand Avenue closed to vehicles due to bluff instability; pathway retained for pedestrians.
- 1990s–2000s: Hazards Abatement District studied stabilization alternatives; the proposed seawall was denied by state and local agencies.
- 2005: City Council voted to maintain an 8-foot walkway within the public right-of-way and to relocate the path as needed in response to erosion.
- 2017: Additional bluff failures led to closure of the Oakland–Hollister segment and formation of a community ad hoc “Depot Hill Bluff Group.”
- 2023–2025: Repeated winter storms accelerated bluff retreat, damaging the relocated pathway and storm drain systems.

In February 2025, severe storms caused further bluff failure between Saxon and Oakland Avenues, resulting in partial collapse of the relocated path and damage to drainage infrastructure. Emergency work was completed to restore drainage, but the path remains compromised. On April 10, 2025, City Council considered the status of the pathway, received extensive public comment, and directed staff to work with a community steering committee and return in six months with updated options and cost estimates.

To support Council’s review, Pacific Crest Engineering was retained to conduct a hazard and risk assessment of the bluff and pathway between Central and Oakland Avenues. Their scope includes bluff surveying, historic photo analysis, geological mapping, and projections of bluff retreat timelines. In early October 2025, Public Works also completed significant drainage repairs to the outfall nearest Saxon Avenue to improve stormwater function and reduce localized erosion.

Discussion:

Summary of Findings

Pacific Crest Engineering’s October 2025 report (Attachment 1) confirms that the bluff continues to retreat episodically due to undercutting of the Purisima Formation bedrock by wave action and erosion of the overlying Marine Terrace Deposits. Failures typically occur as slabs of bedrock topple when wave erosion intersects vertical fractures, taking the upper soils with them.

The firm’s review of 1956 stereophotographs compared with current mapping indicates a long-term bluff retreat rate between 0.33 and 0.66 feet per year, equating to approximately 3–7 feet of retreat over 10 years. A second, more conservative projection based on the angle of repose of the terrace deposits (~38°) suggests potential retreat of 12–22 feet within 1–6 years depending on rainfall, storms, and seismic activity. The angle-of-repose line does not represent the expected full bluff-top position within that period, but rather reflects areas where portions of the bluff are most likely to reach that limit during wet or seismic conditions. The two projections bracket a likely range for future bluff position, with actual retreat expected to fall between them.

Pacific Crest's modeling suggests a relocated pathway, set as far inland as feasible, reduced to four feet in width, and aligned along existing property lines, could remain functional for approximately ten years under typical conditions. The eastern corner near Oakland Avenue could be threatened in less than a decade even under this most conservative alignment.

Erosion control measures, such as vegetation or minor surface treatments, may slow erosion of the terrace soils but will not prevent continued bluff retreat, which is driven from the bottom up by wave and bedrock processes. Larger-scale armoring, such as seawalls, retaining walls, or groins, could theoretically stabilize the bluff, but would likely cost tens of millions of dollars and require complex multi-year permitting and design.

Pacific Crest recommends, if the path is going to be retained, to relocate the path as far inland as possible, designing a proper grading and drainage plan, and avoiding concentration or discharge of stormwater near the bluff edge. Further, the work needs to be done pursuant to an approved engineered plan to minimize long term City liability. These steps could extend the life of the relocated pathway by several years but will not eliminate long-term erosion risks.

The community steering committee has continued to meet since spring 2025 and will present its findings at this meeting.

Next Steps and Implementation Considerations

If Council directs staff to pursue relocation of the Grand Avenue Pathway, the next step would be to prepare an engineered grading and drainage plan based on detailed topographic mapping. The plan would be designed to reduce ponding near the bluff edge and prevent concentrated discharge that could accelerate erosion. Environmental review and a Coastal Development Permit would be required for bluff-top construction. That permit could be issued by the Planning Commission. Erosion-control improvements to the bluff face would require Coastal Commission review.

Following completion of design and permitting, staff would coordinate with adjacent property owners to remove existing encroachments within the public right-of-way and to secure any temporary access needed for construction. Once permits are in place, the path could be reconstructed along the most landward feasible alignment, providing an expected usable life of approximately a decade under current retreat conditions.

The combined process of survey, design, environmental review, and permitting is expected to take roughly 6 to 12 months, depending on whether Coastal Commission review is required. Staff estimates this process would cost approximately \$30-50,000, excluding staff time.

Construction costs will depend on final alignment and material selection. Based on comparable public projects, the combined cost of design, permitting, and construction is expected to range from \$400,000 to \$700,000, including fencing, drainage improvements, and minor stabilization work. Long-term maintenance and monitoring may also be necessary. There are potential significant cost saving opportunities depending on the scope and scale of needed grading and drainage work.

Fiscal Impact: The Pacific Crest Engineering contract totals \$18,090. The October 2025 drainage repair at the Saxon outfall cost \$39,000. No additional fiscal actions are requested at this time.

Attachments:

1. Pacific Crest Engineering Inc. – Updated Limited Geological Investigation: Grand Avenue Footpath Between Central and Oakland Avenues (October 14, 2025)

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