

Capitola City Council

Agenda Report

Meeting: April 10, 2025

From: Public Works Department

Subject: Grand Avenue Pathway



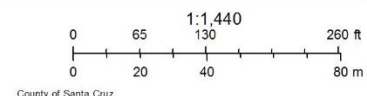
Recommended Action: Receive a report on recent bluff failure and provide direction to staff on the next steps to address pathway safety and public access on the Grand Avenue Pathway.

Background: The Grand Avenue Pathway, which historically ran along the top of the bluff on Depot Hill between Central Avenue and Sacramento Avenue, is designated as part of the California Coastal Trail. The path is treasured by residents and visitors for providing public access to stunning views of the City of Capitola and the Monterey Bay. Due to coastal bluff erosion, Grand Avenue east of Central Avenue has been closed to vehicular traffic since approximately the 1980s. The pedestrian walkway extends two blocks east of Central Avenue to Oakland Avenue.

Grand Avenue Pathway



June 12, 2023



From 1997 to 2004, a Hazards Abatement District composed of 18 homeowners evaluated the long-term stability of the bluffs between Central Avenue and Livermore Avenue east of the existing trail. This effort culminated in the submission of an application and Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for a seawall, which was denied by the Planning Commission; a subsequent appeal was denied by the City Council on November 10, 2004. Findings for the denial included inadequate evaluation of alternatives, lack of effort to mitigate erosion due to drainage, lack of imminent threat to structures, the project only providing short-

term benefit, and loss of public access regardless of project construction. The Hazards Abatement District has not applied for any additional projects for bluff stabilization.

On March 24, 2005, the City Council directed staff to maintain a minimum walkway width of eight feet within the Grand Avenue right-of-way, and that the public walkway be relocated within the right-of-way as necessary until such time that the path is no longer usable. That action also included a recommendation that future City Councils should not consider eminent domain for the public walkway should the right-of-way become too narrow to safely accommodate pedestrians.

Road right-of-way is an easement for the purposes of constructing and maintaining roadways, including pedestrian facilities. The City may claim all or only a portion of an easement for these purposes. In the case of Grand Avenue, between Central Avenue and Oakland Avenue, the City has not used or maintained the right-of-way between the old roadway and the right of way boundary, and the adjacent property owners have utilized this area for their benefit, generally for landscaping. Private property owners may not establish prescriptive rights against a public easement, so the City maintains the right to claim the unused right-of-way at any time.

On May 25, 2017, the City Council directed the closure of a block of the Grand Avenue Pathway between Oakland Avenue and Hollister Avenue due to the threat of continuing bluff failures in the area, based on the results of a geologic assessment. The City Council also authorized the formation of an ad-hoc citizen group (Depot Hill Bluff Group) charged with studying potential long-term solutions for preservation of the pathway. On October 11, 2018, the Ad Hoc Depot Hill Bluff Group presented options for path preservation, inclusive of filling undercut areas and construction of a groin or seawall. The City Council did not take any action at that time. The pathway between Oakland Avenue and Hollister Avenue remains closed.

In early 2023, following winter storms that triggered additional bluff failures between Saxon Avenue and Oakland Avenue, the City retained Pacific Crest Engineering to assess site conditions. Based on the updated findings, Council directed staff to relocate and repair fencing to maintain an eight-foot-wide pathway within the right-of-way and to reassess the removal of private encroachments that limit the City's ability to fully utilize the right-of-way along this segment. Fencing work was completed by a volunteer group in summer 2023. During budget hearings for Fiscal Year 2024–2025, Council did not include the removal of the encroachments due to other high-priority projects and existing staff workload.

Current Status: Between February 14 and 15, 2025, a severe coastal storm caused further bluff failures along the Grand Avenue Pathway between Saxon Avenue and Oakland Avenue. The failure resulted in the partial collapse of the relocated pedestrian path and damaged the storm drain infrastructure serving the area. The drainage pipe and bluff beneath the path were lost in the collapse, though the fencing installed in 2023 remains standing in its most recent location. However, the fencing is no longer secure or safe for public use.

On February 28, 2025, Public Works crews completed emergency repairs to the storm drain inlet and re-established a functional drainage connection in the area.

In response to the recent damage, the City has again retained Pacific Crest Engineering to evaluate the condition of the bluff and provide updated recommendations for public safety and planning.

An updated letter from Pacific Crest Engineering dated April 3, 2025, confirms that the bluff retreat continues and has accelerated in the vicinity of the pathway between Saxon and Oakland Avenues. The recent failure was centered near a corrugated plastic storm drain outfall that daylighted at the bluff edge. The bluff in this area consists of fragile marine terrace deposits that are nearly vertical and prone to failure, especially when saturated.

The projected top-of-bluff retreat line continues to encroach into the Grand Avenue right-of-way, threatening the feasibility of maintaining a stable path even if relocated inland. According to the engineering analysis, erosion will likely continue to lay back the top of the bluff to an average angle of 38 degrees. This could occur within one to six years, depending on storm intensity and rainfall patterns. This erosion would leave approximately 10' between the future top-of-bluff and the private property.

The report strongly advises against the use of heavy equipment within 15 feet of the bluff edge due to the risk of triggering additional landslides. Any construction should be done by hand during dry conditions. The geotechnical report recommends not plugging the culvert unless stormwater can be rerouted via hard piping to avoid saturation of the marine terrace deposits. The nearest stormwater pipe, that does not drain into a cliff-side outfall and is potentially accessible from this location, is on Monterey Ave.

The consultant concludes that, even with intervention, any drainage or pathway improvements in this segment may be undermined and threatened in less than a decade, without full stabilization of the bluff, which would require costly and extensive armoring interventions.

Discussion: Staff evaluated options to restore a safe and accessible public path along Grand Avenue, including fencing relocation and removal of private encroachments within the right-of-way. Relocation alone is no longer feasible in most locations without reclaiming the full right-of-way, as existing private landscaping and improvements restrict available space. Maintaining an eight-foot-wide path will require the removal of private improvements between Saxon Avenue and Oakland Avenue. Encroachments vary significantly: some properties have no encroachments, while others include fencing, landscaping, or hardscape features. Some improvements were permitted; others have no record of approval. Reconfiguration of the trail will require identifying encroachment limits, verifying boundaries, and engaging with property owners.

Shifting the pathway inland will also necessitate modification of the existing drainage system, which was installed to align with the current path location. Redesigning the trail will likely involve relocating storm drain inlets and piping to ensure functionality and prevent further erosion.

However, recent geotechnical findings raise serious concerns about the long-term feasibility of investing in a new path in this area. The 2025 engineering report projects the top of bluff may retreat significantly within one to six years. Even if an 8-foot path were established today, this degree of bluff retreat would threaten the available space for a safe public path and fencing.

Work near the bluff must be done by hand due to the fragility of the marine terrace deposits. This limits constructability and increases costs. Additionally, the available right-of-way varies and is most constrained in the area immediately east of Saxon Avenue. In that location, the fence was previously relocated in 2023 to preserve an 8-foot-wide path without removing encroachments, with the fence set approximately 10 feet from the bluff. The current distance between the property line and the bluff edge in this location is approximately 20 feet.

Should the Council direct staff to pursue construction of a new pathway in this location, the first step would be to retain a civil engineer to perform a feasibility study that examines constructability, drainage requirements, geotechnical constraints, and long-term viability. If the path is determined to be feasible, a design process would follow. This approach would require considerable staff time for fieldwork, legal coordination, outreach, and design; as well as funding to support trail grading, surfacing, and fencing.

As an alternative, the City could consider permanent closure of the pathway at Saxon Avenue, similar to the 2017 closure. This would require a Coastal Development Permit and may be subject to appeal to the Coastal Commission.

Another option is to revisit bluff stabilization strategies, such as those proposed by the Ad Hoc Depot Hill Bluff Group in 2018, including filling undercut areas or constructing groins or seawalls. While potentially effective in preserving the pathway long-term, these strategies carry significant cost, permitting requirements, and environmental impacts.

Fiscal Impact: Removal of encroachments and construction of a new trail alignment would have a fiscal impact, though the total cost would depend on the scale of work and the need for surface improvements. Staff time requirements would be high, given the complexity of the coordination and legal boundaries involved. Closure of the pathway would be less costly in the near term but would permanently eliminate a segment of the Coastal Trail. Pursuing bluff stabilization would both involve higher levels of complexity,

long timelines, and varying levels of risk. Depending on Council direction, staff will return to Council with a time and cost estimate during consideration of the FY 2025-26 budget.

Attachments:

1. Geological Investigation – Oakland to Saxon (Pacific Crest Engineering, 2025)
2. Geological Investigation – Oakland to Saxon (Pacific Crest Engineering, 2023)
3. Geological Investigation – Hollister to Oakland (Zinn Geology, 2017)

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