



LCP Beaches and Bluffs Hazards Adaptation Summary

Santa Cruz's coastline—home to our iconic beaches, blufftops, and trails—is facing growing risks from sea level rise, erosion, and intense storms due to climate change. To address these threats, the City is updating its Local Coastal Program (LCP), a planning document required by the California Coastal Act to ensure the effective implementation of statewide coastal resource protection goals through local land use planning and decisions. The LCP is the primary land use authority and main tool guiding land use in the Coastal Zone. It also is the most important document for ensuring that the City can implement its vision for West Cliff in harmony with the Coastal Commission, the state agency that implements the Coastal Act. The City's LCP hasn't been updated since 1994, and Coastal Commission guidance recommends that the LCP be updated to address resiliency and climate change, which is why the City is creating a new Beaches and Bluffs policy chapter. The updated policies aim to protect the shoreline's natural beauty, public access, and safety of homes and infrastructure, while also planning for long-term resilience.

What's Happening and Why It Matters:

Over time, waves, storms, and rising seas are wearing away our bluffs and beaches. This erosion is happening both gradually and suddenly, especially during strong winter storms. In recent years, damaging events like the 2022–2023 atmospheric rivers have shown how vulnerable parts of our coast are. If resiliency measures are not taken, the value of properties and infrastructure exposed to coastal climate hazards will exceed one billion dollars in Santa Cruz by the end of the century. Also, the resiliency measures will be central to the protection of the amazing beaches and natural resources of the City's shoreline.

Santa Cruz's Approach:

The City is following statewide coastal guidance to plan smarter and adapt earlier. The key goals are to:

- Keep public beaches and access open and safe.
- Use science to guide decisions and update hazard maps regularly.
- Avoid or limit new construction in high-risk areas.
- Monitor erosion and coastal changes each year and after storms.

- Prioritize nature-based solutions like beach replenishment or living shorelines over harder engineered approaches such as concrete seawalls, where appropriate.
- Align with the Local Hazard Mitigation and Climate Adaptation Plan and the West Cliff 50-year Vision and 5-year Roadmap.

Adaptation Planning:

The LCP Beaches and Bluffs Chapter lays the foundation for the City to develop more detailed Shoreline Adaptation Management Plans (SAMPs) for West Cliff, Main/Cowell Beaches, and East Cliff over the next two years. These SAMPs will:

- Identify short- and medium-term adaptation strategies.
- Include community input and consider environmental justice.
- Plan for future sea level rise scenarios and consider coastal habitats and public shoreline access and recreation.
- Explore funding options for future resiliency projects.

New Development and Infrastructure Policies:

The LCP Beaches and Bluffs Chapter includes policies to protect development, respond to coastal erosion, and minimize new seawall construction, such as:

- Design new development near the coast to last without needing future sea walls.
- Have land- owners in hazard zones acknowledge future risks.
- Allow shoreline protection (like seawalls or revetments) only under strict conditions and when they are the least environmentally damaging, feasible option.
- Consider future erosion in public infrastructure improvements, and redesign beach outfalls to protect water quality and scenery.

Working Together:

The City will collaborate with state agencies, nearby jurisdictions, and the community to align all coastal adaptation efforts. The vision is to maintain a safe, accessible, and ecologically healthy coastline for present and future generations.

Next Steps:

There will continue to be opportunities to engage with this work through the SAMP development process likely starting in fall 2025 and running through 2026. Additionally, the LCP Beaches and Bluffs Chapter is only one of six policy chapters in the LCP and the first to be updated. The other five policy chapters in the LCP still forthcoming are: Coastal Access, Recreation and Visitor Serving Uses, Marine Environment, Land Resources and Development. Updates to these chapters will likely be available for public review in 2026.