Our Ocean Backyard

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A Harbor at Santa Cruz

The Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, but there is a longer history of boats, wharves and places to moor boats in Santa Cruz. There weren’t a lot of sail boats or yachts in the early years in this corner of the bay, but a lot of shipping of cement, lumber, potatoes and other produce from the wharves that came and went. The municipal wharf built in 1914 has survived with periodic repairs over the years for 110 years. It outlived the original Cowell Wharf (1849-1907), the Gharkey Wharf (1857-1882), the Railroad Wharf (1875-1922), and Cross Wharf that connected the Railroad Wharf and the Gharkey Wharf (1875-1882). There was also the Pleasure Pier in front of the Boardwalk that lasted from 1904 to 1965.

A few early Italian seamen jumped ship in Santa Cruz in the 1870s, perhaps because they saw the beauty of the place and thought of home, and perhaps because they were tired of life at sea. At least one of them returned to the Riva Tregoso region of Italy and expounded upon the virtues of Santa Cruz. Eventually sixty fishing families migrated to this area which launched the commercial fishing enterprise. Boats were built and an Italian community began to grow. What was missing, however, was a place to keep their small fishing boats safe during the winter storms. A few could be raised onto the wharves, but space was limited.

As early as 1869 there was local talk of building a breakwater from Lighthouse Point to provide a protected anchorage. That would have been a massive undertaking at that time and the shipping industry here really wasn’t of the size to support such an investment. Ten years later, the Army Corps of Engineers surveyed the coast here for a possible harbor of refuge, but nothing happened until after World War II when a group of local commercial fishermen, boaters, business owners and residents organized to get the attention and support of both the state and federal governments. The Corps returned in 1949 and recommended the formation of a local district to lead and then administer harbor development and then management.

A local election was held in 1950 and the Santa Cruz Port District was formed under the California Harbors and Navigation Code. The purpose of the district was to provide and manage small craft harbor facilities in Santa Cruz County. Several sites were evaluated for the harbor, including both Neary’s and Woods Lagoons. Woods Lagoon was eventually selected by the Corps of Engineers. At this point it’s important to look at the physical setting of the harbor and the pre-design research done by the Corps.

The Corps proposed that Woods Lagoon be improved northward or inland to form the harbor and that parallel rubble-mound (rock) jetties be provided to protect the entrance channel. They further proposed improvement (dredging) of Woods Lagoon with an entrance channel, an inner harbor, and a turning basin. The dredged material from the harbor was deemed suitable for deposition behind bulkheads along the sides of the harbor, thus raising the edges of the original lagoon.

The following conclusions are taken from the Corps’ feasibility study concerning the environmental conditions in the area:

1. The predominant littoral transport is downcoast. Reversals occur at the proposed harbor area and in other areas of Monterey Bay.
2. Erosion in the northern part of the bay will continue because the alignment of the coast is conducive to rapid movement of littoral drift out of the area (downcoast).
3. Estimates by the Corps of the average net rate of downcoast littoral drift ranged from 25,000 to 300,000 cubic yards annually (this is equivalent to 2,500 to 30,000 dump truck loads of sand).
4. Jetties would form littoral barriers which would benefit upcoast beaches (Seabright and Main Beaches) but would probably cause erosion of the coast to the south and east. If the net annual littoral drift rate approached 300,000 cubic yards, downcoast erosion would be rapid and continuous. Pocket beaches would be denuded and bluff erosion would accelerate immediately downcoast.
5. The possible harmful effects of jetty construction could be offset initially by depositing sandy material obtained from harbor dredging on the downcoast beaches and offset permanently by providing a means of annually bypassing 300,000 cubic yards of littoral material.
6. Should the annual rate of littoral drift rate approach the lower estimate of 25,000 cubic yards, the damaging effects of the jetties would be much less pronounced. A sand-bypassing system would not be required and maintenance dredging of the harbor could provide the downcoast beach material. Construction of a sand bypassing plant should, therefore, be deferred until its needs were demonstrated.

One factor that was not given significant consideration was the discharge of significant volumes of sediment by the San Lorenzo River, just 1000 yards to the west or upcoast.

The State Department of Parks and Recreation began acquiring land for the harbor as well as the supporting parking and concession areas, and in 1962, Congress appropriated $1.6 million for jetty construction and the dredging of the original (south) harbor basin. Loans from the State Department of Harbors & Watercraft (now the Department of Boating and Waterways) were obtained, totaling $3 million, to pay for the cost of the pilings, docks, restrooms, and parking facilities. The local share (35.1%) of the federally-built jetty system was paid for by the Port District from property tax funds that had been accumulating since 1951.

Because this was to be a harbor with ocean-going boat traffic, it came under the jurisdiction of the Army Corps of Engineers. By law, the Corps must design and oversee harbor construction. Plans were completed in early 1962, bids were advertised and Granite Construction Company of Watsonville was selected as the contractor.

There was a lot of work to be done to construct the harbor, a lot. This included rerouting Atlantic Avenue which originally followed the shoreline across the entrance to Woods Lagoon, building what is now the Murray Street Bridge, dredging Woods Lagoon, installing steel bulkheads along both sides of the new harbor, driving the piles for the boat slips, importing rock to build the jetties and casting and placing the concrete tetrapods to anchor the outer end of the west jetty. More to come on this project.