West Cliff is one of the city’s most beloved places to walk, bike or drive, for young and old, and residents and visitors alike. But this iconic corridor has long been under threat from wave erosion. The city has now completed an exhaustive evaluation of the cliff erosion hot spots and problem areas and has developed a range of future management recommendations. This study was requested by the California Coastal Commission to deal with the many tons of rip-rap that had been placed over the year to protect the bluff under emergency permits. The next step is Coastal Commission review of the study and proposed management plan.

The ongoing erosion of the bluffs and efforts to protect them from wave attack is clear to anyone who frequents West Cliff Drive. What to do about this continuing retreat is less clear. From the end of Bay Street to Natural Bridges, West Cliff belongs to the people and lots of public input has been collected during the erosion and management study. For the entire 2.6 miles of this ocean-front walkway, people have an unobstructed view of the coast and ocean. This is a unique situation that we are very fortunate to be able to enjoy and very different from the opposite side of town and most other coastal communities.

East Cliff Drive from Twin Lakes nearly to Capitola is almost completely fronted by homes, blocking the public’s view of the coast. There are several narrow viewpoints, primarily at the mouths of the coastal drainages, Corcoran Lagoon and Moran Lake for example, and then the stretch along the bluffs extending from Pleasure Point to 41st Avenue.

The Pleasure Point area underwent a very similar study beginning in 2000 as it was experiencing the same problems as West Cliff Drive, only more critical. One lane of East Cliff had been closed, the pedestrians and bike riders were dangerously close to the traffic lane, and there were both sewer and water lines beneath the roadway that were being threatened. The County Redevelopment Agency undertook a major assessment of the issues, evaluated alternatives, regularly solicited public input, and finally arrived at an agreed-upon plan, which is what we see there today.

Loose rock and concrete were removed from the beach, the bluff was armored with a tied-back shotcrete wall designed to look as much as possible like the natural bluff materials, safe public access was provided to the beach, the single lane of traffic was made permanent and bike lanes and a pedestrian walkway were completed. While this took some time, I believe the finished product is something everyone who lives in the area and/or uses this stretch of shoreline is pleased with.

The West Cliff Drive management plan may ultimately involve some of the same measures employed along Pleasure Point: removal of some of the rip-rap from the beach, thus providing for more public use; replacement of some of rip-rap by much narrower but more effective and less intrusive tied-back walls; and at some future date, depending upon long-term bluff erosion,
moving sections of the pedestrian path farther inland away from the bluff edge, and potentially converting West Cliff Drive to a one-way street. These are all potential options and choices and implementation of any of these will depend upon both Coastal Commission approval, and also the availability of funding. One very large difference between the Pleasure Point project and West Cliff is that the former was only 1000 feet long, whereas the total length of West Cliff is about 14,000 feet.

The future of West Cliff will depend upon both the natural processes that are wearing away the coastline as evidenced by collapsed arches and eroding bluffs, as well as the priorities of the residents of Santa Cruz for future use of the beaches, the pedestrian path and the roadway, and also the California Coastal Commission.