



County of Santa Cruz

Department of Community Development and Infrastructure

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Recently, an email was shared with many coastal property owners and community members, presenting several inaccurate claims about how the County regulates land use and development on coastal areas.

We've outlined each of these claims below, along with accurate information to help clarify the County's policies and practices.

✓ Fact Check

Claim: *"Bluff-top and beach properties are being deemed undevelopable."*

Fact: The County has not declared bluff-top or beach properties categorically undevelopable. The County follows policies in the certified [Local Coastal Program \(LCP\)](#), which allows development in coastal areas when it complies with rules governing development in hazardous areas. Development rules are based on protecting public safety and the environment, not on arbitrary decisions. These standards are based on geologic studies and state and local law. In some high-risk locations, stricter setbacks may apply based on updated geologic data and the size and scope of the project. While some property owners may encounter constraints, those decisions are rooted in site specific safety science and long-standing state and local law and not sudden or secret changes.

Claim: *"Minor repairs are triggering unreasonable bluff setback requirements."*

Fact: Minor repairs, such as replacing a water heater or windows, do not trigger bluff setback requirements. The County follows policies and codes in the LCP, which requires only larger projects, as defined in the code, to meet bluff setback requirements. These rules establish a balanced threshold between a major and minor project and a methodology for categorizing the project's scope. This sets up a reasonable relationship between the size of the project and the level of technical investigation required so only larger projects need to meet bluff setback requirements. Projects that might be considered minor but extend the existing structure in a seaward direction do need to meet bluff setback requirements. These rules have been in place for many years and have not changed.

Claim: *“Hazard zone rules are being misapplied to restrict rebuild rights.”*

Fact: The County applies existing policies and codes in response to the various types of project applications it receives. Existing rules are applied equally to all projects. On a level playing field different projects are evaluated based on their individual characteristics. This means applying the same set of standards to projects of various types and scope may result in different outcomes for different projects. In some cases, unique site conditions related to geology or existing development, for example, can lead to different outcomes for similar project types. While some property owners may experience restrictions, those result from application of existing rules to different project- and site-specific conditions and not any new or different interpretation of the rules.

Claim: *“Local Coastal Program decisions have occurred without public input.”*

Fact: The LCP is a community driven effort and changes only occur with public input and public hearings both locally and at the State Coastal Commission. No LCP changes have occurred that would affect coastal properties in Santa Cruz County without public input. The Coastal Act requires that local governments develop LCPs (consisting of Land Use Plans and policies and Implementing ordinances) to carry out policies of the California Coastal Act at the local level. The LCP guides land use and development along the coast to balance environmental protection, public access, and sustainable growth. There is a process outlined in local and state law that guides the LCP amendment process. During the Sea Level Rise Vulnerability Assessment (SLRVA) Project, we continue to process permits for home building and remodeling projects on coastal bluffs and beaches, applying existing codes and policies to those projects. The SLRVA Project is not influencing or affecting in any way existing applications for permits. Future LCP changes resulting from the SLRVA Project will go through the public process. Whether the changes are minor or major, the process is the same and must be followed. While some property owners may receive decisions on project applications, those actions are based on existing LCP policies and codes and not sudden or secret changes to the LCP.