

Eroding cliff prompts Pacifica evacuation

Justin Berton and Henry K. Lee, San Francisco Chronicle, 12-17-09

PACIFICA -- The owners of a seaside Pacifica apartment building that was evacuated Thursday had been applying for emergency permits to build a rock barrier at the base of an eroding bluff, but nature and high tides beat them to the punch.

Delfarid Fanine, co-owner of the 12-unit building at 330 Esplanade Drive, said the owners told tenants weeks ago that they were hoping to prevent the bluff from vanishing from under the apartments.

"Unfortunately, it all happened before anyone expected," Fanine said. "It's nature. No one can beat nature."

According to city officials and workers at the apartments, as much as 40 feet of land has disappeared at the property in the past year. Early Thursday, the bluff starting falling away in alarmingly large chunks, and city officials red-tagged the apartments.

The 20 or so tenants were told just before 11 a.m. that they had only minutes to leave, prompting a mad dash to save whatever they could. One resident flung belongings from a second-story window.

Then, a few minutes later, city officials decided the tenants could safely remove possessions until 3 p.m. Mattresses, couches, chairs and random items such as fishing poles and reading lamps lined the sidewalk.

Randall Nelson, the building manager who has lived there for 14 years, said he was upset about leaving. But he also said he understood when he moved in that along with the picturesque view came the possibility that the cliff wouldn't sit still.

"We live here because we love the ocean," Nelson said, "but nothing lasts forever."

Pacifica residents have long dealt with the challenges of living on the seaside bluffs.

In 1998, seven homes on Esplanade Drive were demolished after El Niño-powered storms ate away at the cliff upon which they stood.

Nearly all the shoreline in Pacifica is soft, compacted sand, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. The weak soil, the direct attack of waves and the saturation from rainwater make the area especially susceptible to erosion.

The apartments were built in 1961. The bluff has been eroding for some time, but in the past two years the situation has grown much worse, officials said.

Tony Fortunato, a superintendent with Engineered Soil Repairs, estimated that the cliff had receded as much as 15 feet in recent days because of unusually high tides.

"They had a lot more real estate last year," Fortunato said. "A lot of it is in the ocean now."

He said his company will try to save the building in the coming days by using cranes to lower boulders into the cliff's base to create a rock wall, known as riprap.

Owners of buildings on either side of the apartment building inserted similar barriers last year. The cliffs there have withstood the recent high tides.

Fanine said her company applied for permits from the California Coastal Commission at the same time last year, but delays held up the work.

Amanda O'Connell, who moved into the apartments four months ago, said she received a letter from the owners last month that a barrier would be completed by Christmas and they would have nothing to worry about.

"Guess they didn't make it," O'Connell said while packing a car. She wasn't sure where she was going to live.

Paul Wells, 47, moved in less than a month ago from Redwood City.

"I pretty much got entirely unpacked, just in time to be told it was time to start packing again," Wells said. "Of course I'm frustrated. I'm still in some degree of shock. I know that once the shock wears off, I'm going to feel a lot more anger."