

Pacifica evacuees may be displaced for year or more

Julie Scott, Bay Area News Group, 12-24-09

PACIFICA — The families forced to evacuate their apartments at 330 Esplanade Ave. on Dec. 17 may be hoping to move in again someday if the cliff behind their building is restored. But it appears that the refugees of the Esplanade Apartments won't be able to return for a year or more.

Although building engineers say emergency work to lay rocks at the base of the still-eroding cliff will be done by the new year, so much of the bluff top in front of the structure disappeared last week that it has scuttled a plan for long-term repairs that would hold the cliff together for the next 50 years.

The owners of the building have said they still hope to re-engineer the bluff top to resist natural erosion and convince the city of Pacifica that it's safe enough to allow residents to move back in again. Co-owner Farshid Samsami declined to comment, saying he first needs to speak with his attorney.

Workers completed a beach access road Wednesday evening that will allow them to stack boulders along the beach more efficiently than the giant crane that has been lowering them over the apartment buildings this week.

No more than 12 feet of soil now separate the edge of the cliff from the empty apartment building in some places, but once the emergency rock work is done, the cliffs in front of 310, 320 and 330 Esplanade Ave. should be safe from erosion for the winter, according to Bart Willoughby, who represents the building's owners.

The owners of 340, 360 and 380 Esplanade are also shoring up the bottom of their cliffs with giant boulders this week after obtaining a separate emergency permit from the California Coastal Commission.

"I've had a few people come over and ask for reassurance. All I can say is we have rock in front of 310 and 320 — I think we'll probably be OK for the winter," said Willoughby, who lives at 310 Esplanade Ave. and was the first to witness a landslide the morning of Dec. 17.

What happens when the winter ends is anybody's guess, however.

The owners of all three apartment buildings previously submitted an application to the Coastal Commission for a larger project that would involve sinking a concrete wall 15 feet below sea level to deflect the velocity of the ocean's waves. A second concrete-and-steel stitch pier retaining wall would be sunk into the top of the cliff to hold the bluff together.

But it appears that not enough dirt is left at the top of the cliff to hold the upper wall, so the design is going back to the drawing board, said Steve O'Connor, an engineering geologist under contract with the owners of 310, 320 and 330 Esplanade Ave.

"There's always that point as to when it's not economically practical or feasible to do it. It doesn't mean they (the owners) wouldn't do the repair on the lower cliff because if you do not take care of the lower cliff, it can retreat in 10-to-15 foot chunks or more," he said.

It is unclear whether those repairs would satisfy the conditions of the city of Pacifica, which evacuated the building and will ultimately decide whether it is safe enough to live in again. City officials are skeptical about how likely that will be.

"They would have to justify that the cliff would have the ability to support the building above it in normal

conditions and also in a seismic event," said building department official Doug Rider. "It's going to take a lot to be in agreement that the apartments are safe in their location because it's so close to the cliff."

The Coastal Commission will also review the project proposal to ensure that it can survive for 50 years — the benchmark for longevity under the Coastal Act.

Bowing to Mother Nature

The real question is whether this building and many others on the California coast should be continuously protected by artificial means rather than let Mother Nature take her course.

Esplanade Apartments has benefited from a loophole in the Coastal Act that allows all buildings constructed before 1972 to erect sea walls and other forms of protection if no other option exists. Today, plans for new buildings on the waterfront are approved by the Coastal Commission only if they allow for 50 years of natural bluff "retreat."

Esplanade Apartments has capitalized on this rule for many years, most recently installing piles of riprap at the bottom of the cliff in 2003 and again this week, according to Ruby Pap, coastal planner with the Coastal Commission's San Francisco office.

The soil in Pacifica is easily saturated and prone to landslides. In that sense, any feat of engineering only delays the inevitable.

"This is going to be happening more and more with the winter El Niños and climate change and bigger storms. This is a very hazardous area, so it may not last for many years. I am concerned this is not going to be a good long-term fix for these property owners," said Pap.

The Coastal Commission is charged with ensuring public access to beaches, but that duty can conflict with constructed sea walls and the like. In some cases such projects accelerate the rate at which the ocean eats away at the beach below the sea wall, rendering some beaches impassable in wintertime, according to O'Connor, the engineer.

"Whether you install a sea wall or rock riprap and you slow the threat to the bluff or dune, the shoreline is still retreating seaward so at some point the beach will eventually disappear."

No intervention

Bluff retreat in Pacifica is a well-studied phenomenon, and the city has been aware of erosion problems on Esplanade Avenue since at least 1998, when El Niño winter storms caused several homes in the street's 500 block to slide into the sea. The city knew Esplanade Apartments was in a fight against time to protect its 200 residents.

Could it have done more to protect and warn residents? Unfortunately not, say city officials.

"The building department's responsibility on private property is that we would be called out to investigate like in the case of 330 Esplanade. The property owner's responsibility is to get permits and whatever is associated with the property's safety," said Rider, the city building official.

The Coastal Commission also takes a hands-off approach to protecting coastal property, even if staff members are aware of a problem.

"We just respond to development applications. The law doesn't allow us to go out and tell people what to do if they're not doing development," Pap said.

When it comes to the safety of residents, the city does not monitor bluff erosion and relies on the cooperation of a building owner to react to an emergency in time to evacuate.

That has implications for other homes in Pacifica and along the county's coastline that are susceptible to erosion.

Some obvious candidates are two dilapidated homes near 520 Esplanade Ave. whose backyards consist of steep, eroded hillside and a sheer drop to the ocean. The homes survived the 1997-98 El Niño while their next-door neighbors did not.

Whether they are safe to live in is not the city's concern.

"I've never been called out to go look at them," Rider said.