Bluff-top homeowners act in own interests and threaten public coastal resources

A small, but vocal group tries to un-wind years of negotiations and planning with threats of lawsuits and complaints that the 10-year process hasn’t served them.

San Diego, California – A precedent-setting victory for public beach preservation along the California coastline could be lost if the Solana Beach City Council next week fails to approve changes to its Local Coastal Plan (LCP) that were carefully negotiated with the California Coastal Commission (CCC) and the Surfrider Foundation earlier this year.

The City Council is facing pressure from wealthy bluff-top homeowners, who have sued the Coastal Commission in an attempt to scuttle the progressive changes that evolved over a 10-year process that involved the Coastal Commission, local residents and the San Diego Chapter of the Surfrider Foundation. The Coastal Commission approved the Local Coastal Plan in March, but with changes that must be ratified by the Solana Beach City Council.

The compromise opposed by the property owners would continue an existing requirement for property owners to compensate the city and beachgoers for building seawalls on public property and to pay into a fund to offset the loss of sand that normally would nourish the beach due to natural erosion. It would also establish a 20-year time limit on seawall permits.

The discussion will take place at the Sept 26th City Council meeting, which starts at 6pm. If the City Council members decide to reject the changes made by the Coastal Commission, they jeopardize everything gained over the past 10 years and the entire LCP process will have to start over again. Furthermore, this decision has statewide implications, as coastal cities all along California who struggle with seawall issues and mitigation are watching to see what happens in Solana Beach.

“Most people who use the beach don’t live right on the coastline, bluff-top homeowners are not the only ones that matter. People come from all over the County and the Country to surf and enjoy our coastlines; they spend money in the process, and give beach-towns like Solana Beach its culture. Let’s hope that the Solana Beach City Council will stand up for what is right on Sept 26th. There was a long series of compromises made leading up the March CCC meeting, in which all parties were trying to make sure their needs would be met, including the City. The bluff-top homeowners didn’t get their way, but their way does not comply with the Coastal Act. In response, we have seen a series of delay tactics including filing a lawsuit against the Coastal Commission, and now these most recent efforts to coerce the Solana Beach City Council,” said Julia Chunn-Heer, Campaign Coordinator for Surfrider San Diego.

“Seawalls are being used to protect private property at the expense of the public. It is a very sensitive issue, but the Coastal Commission offered guidance and recommendations to uphold the Coastal Act. It would be in the City’s best interest to follow their lead, and remain under the protection of the State Attorney since the angry bluff-top homeowners have already filed litigation as yet another delay tactic” she continued.

“Solana Beach residents deserve to have the security and permit expediency of having a Local Coastal Plan. Solana Beach is one of the few remaining coastal cities without a LCP. After years of effort, hopefully this vocal few isn’t able to spoil the LCP process for the rest of us. The Coastal Commission has not overstepped their bounds, and is only looking out for the best long-term care of the coastal zone, and to uphold the Coastal Act,” according to Jim Jaffee, Co-Chair of Beach Preservation for Surfrider San Diego.

There were a few sticking points between the Solana Beach City Council and the Coastal Commission leading up to the March meeting, including debates over short-term vacation rentals and EHSA requirements. But the concerns now being touted by the bluff-top homeowners were not amongst the City’s concerns. In fact, Councilmember Dave Roberts spoke in support of the LCP at the March meeting. Councilmember Joe Kellijian was in attendance supporting the group, and Lesa Heebner even personally called Commissioner Sanchez and spoke in support. When asked about the motion to approve the LCP, City Manager David Ott told the Coastal Commission he would recommend approval.

“We sincerely hope the Solana Beach City Council doesn’t succumb to the bluff-top homeowners and go back on their word; there is
too much riding on this decision,” said Jim Jaffee.

The letter submitted to the Solana Beach City Council detailing the bluff-top homeowners concerns can be found on Surfrider’s website: http://sandiego.surfrider.org/category/beach-preservation, as well as Surfrider’s responses to those concerns. For more on the San Diego County chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, including Surfrider’s Beach Preservation campaign and Beach Preservation Policy, go to http://surfridersd.org.