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UCSB seeks community input as the university plans for sea-level rise

Dynamism defines the coast, which sits in a liminal strip subject to forces from both land and sea. By dint of its prime, beachfront location, UC Santa Barbara must navigate these geographic changes as we adapt to the effects of sea-level rise. In 2024, the university adopted a sea level rise adaptation strategy for the campus with a vision to "maximize campus resilience and protect and restore natural shorelines, through proactive, phased, managed adaptation to sea level rise and shoreline change."

The shoreline adaptation team is now looking to craft a more detailed strategy for how to work with nature to address the main campus's eroding bluffs and berms. The university has been investigating coastal processes on campus, identifying facilities and public resources that are vulnerable to sea-level rise. It is also seeking community input through a survey on the university's website to better understand how the community values different coastal resources in advance of the public meeting on Nov. 5.

"We are curious how important features like coastal bluff trails, beach width and campus lagoon function are valued relative to maintaining roads and buildings in situ as we consider different options for how to proactively address these inevitable transitions," said team member Lisa Stratton, the director of ecosystem management at UCSB's Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration.

Ongoing changes

Sand ebbs and flows with the seasons along the shore, but rising seas threaten to accelerate beach erosion and narrowing in coming decades. Storm surges hit farther up the shoreline, accelerating natural cliff erosion. These processes threaten university infrastructure, public accessibility and habitat on campus, and ultimately require a deliberate strategy to address.

Bluff erosion around campus is particularly pronounced along Lagoon Road, an area that contains critical underground utilities and valuable public access. UCSB Facilities Management recently rerouted the cliff-top pathway across from Anacapa Hall, which traverses a pinch point between the receding bluffs and the residence hall, to the inland side of Lagoon Road for public safety.

On the opposite side of campus, the team learned that a hidden gully — filled in the 1940s — is exacerbating erosion near Manzanita Village. It’s a reminder that we don’t know about some of the historical actions that have shaped campus as it currently appears.

Meanwhile the artificial berm next to the pump house at Campus Point Beach is quite vulnerable to erosion. The feature was constructed in 1942, when the lagoon was part of the former Marine Corps Air Station. Without continual maintenance of the berm, the Campus Lagoon would function much more like the Devereux Slough, which periodically breaches its sand bar to reconnect with the ocean.

Facilities Management has stabilized the berm with sandbags to mitigate severe erosion that has occurred over the last two rainy seasons. “The university has taken interim measures to ensure the safety and function of campus as we craft longer-term solutions,” explained Shari Hammond, UCSB’s former associate director of campus planning & design.

Putting a plan in place

UCSB has made a point to be proactive about its response to sea-level rise. That enables the university to consider its mission and values, and deliberately weigh

tradeoffs, as it charts a path forward, rather than reacting to emergencies with patchwork fixes after the fact.

The university's master strategy for adapting to sea-level rise — approved by the California Coastal Commission — applies the best available science to assess the campus's vulnerability to erosion, flooding and other coastal hazards, assuming as much as 6.6 feet of sea-level rise by the end of the century. The plan covers the university's entire footprint in Santa Barbara and Goleta, including Main Campus, West Campus, Coal Oil Point Reserve, Storke Family Housing and the North Campus Open Space.

The adaptation project is funded by the California State Coastal Conservancy, with student participation supported by UCSB's Coastal Fund. The effort is one of many coastal resilience projects now underway in the region including beach and sediment flow studies by County Flood Control, climate change vulnerabilities at the Santa Barbara Airport and studies on the opportunity to reconnect formerly tidal lands in the Goleta Slough.

Gaucho voice

The shoreline adaptation team has begun to develop a menu of actions for addressing the challenges of sea-level rise, and they need input to guide this process. This is why the team is soliciting feedback from the campus community. They need to know what the community values about different aspects of campus and its coastal resources.

"We want to understand what the community values and how to weigh the inherent tradeoffs," said team member Charles Lester, director of UCSB's Ocean and Coastal Policy Center. For instance, seawalls may protect infrastructure, but they are bad for beaches, he explained. "On the other hand, if we allow erosion to continue, then how should we manage the increasingly limited space along the bluff?" Should the university maintain a dedicated bike path, or should pedestrians and bikes share the same space? Reconfiguring facilities and infrastructure over the course of future development will make campus more resilient to environmental impacts in the long run.

Or consider the lagoon. The berm is increasingly vulnerable to breaching, so the team will evaluate whether to transition this section of the beach to a more natural

cobble and sand. The lagoon might then become more of an intermittently tidal wetland, like Devereux Slough. “We realize that the community is accustomed to the lake-like quality of the lagoon created by the berms and the pumped-in sea water,” Stratton said. “We are looking at allowing a more natural sand berm to develop at campus beach, which would preserve the beach space and allow the lagoon to fluctuate seasonally, which could benefit water quality and support shorebird migration in the spring and fall.”

The shoreline adaptation team hopes to avoid certain actions. Any form of sea wall prevents the shoreline from migrating inland, narrowing flat beaches at higher tides and drowning beaches confined between the rising sea and the armored cliffs. While revetments can protect buildings, roads and utilities for a time, sea-level rise makes this an increasingly costly proposition that may be untenable in the long run.

“The core vision of our strategy is to work with the ocean, not against it,” Lester said. “Our hope is to maintain as much of the natural shoreline system as we can even while we’re protecting buildings, facilities and infrastructure, as well as public access.” Properly weighing these tradeoffs in the coming years will only be possible with active community input.

Tags
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All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.