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Beach Access: Issues and Recommendations

The following guidelines and tips are written from the property owner's point of view. You, as a planner, might find these useful in guiding a permit applicant. Some might save the applicant money as well as minimize aesthetic and environmental impacts. Beach access from Puget Sound bluffs can be a complex issue. A plan well thought out from the beginning can save you and the applicant much time and frustration. Adapt this text to your agency (i.e., fill in appropriate names and phone numbers; add tips unique to your area. Attach that to copies of forms and regulations.)

Homeowners along the edge of shoreline bluffs commonly have spectacular views, but many also long for access to the beach. However, our steep bluffs of glacial and interglacial sediments present challenges. Potentially destabilizing ground-water conditions are common. All such bluffs are eroding. How can we safely cross such dynamic terrain? In some instances, we can't (i.e., safety considerations or construction and maintenance costs may make it totally impractical to cross a 300-foot actively eroding bluff). Common sense alone can identify some of these stretches of bluff. Lacking infinite money, they should be avoided.

Let's assume a bank without insurmountable problems. In order to deal with the variety of conditions on a typical bank different components or techniques are usually combined. For example, use of a trail on a steep vegetated upper bank ending in stairs across a vertical lower bank. For lack of a better term, let's call such combinations a "beach access system".

The combination of such techniques will depend on factors such as bank height, slope angle, vegetation, mode and rate of erosional processes, and available funds. Each site is unique. The determined cliff dweller/would-be beach walker might find some of the following useful in bridging that gap:

- (1) Examine the bluff from below. (You may need a small boat to get far enough away to see the whole bluff.) Take pictures. Sketch geologic units, patterns and species of vegetation, ground-water seepage horizons, surface runoff and/or gullies.

- (2) While reconning your site, note existing beach access systems, if any, along your stretch of bluff. What seems to be working? Check with owners for history, costs. Check out wreckage of old abandoned systems; someone else's mistakes can be very informative.
- (3) Gather available background data. Maps, surveys can be useful. Property boundaries on waterfront lots are commonly skewed, a situation that can complicate plans for any bluff use (see "Tree Removal" Figure 1). You may not own all of 'your' bluff. Examine oblique aerial color photos (copies of late '70s flights may be available for examination at your County Engineer/ Planning Office; mid-'90s flight photos are available on the web at <http://apps.ecy.wa.gov/shorephotos/>). Compare them for changes in erosion modes and patterns on your bluff.
- (4) Talk to old-timers in the area. Do they have knowledge or old photos of landslides or long-gone beach access systems? Does anyone have a geologic report that could be, at least in part, applicable to your site? Talk to adjacent property owners to see if they would be interested in sharing costs or allowing access to more favorable topography.
- (5) Are there alternatives to constructing your own system? For example, is there public beach access within an 'acceptable' distance (half a mile? a mile?) Can you 'buy into' a neighbor's existing beach access system?

If as a bluff-top dweller, you still have the urge to walk your own so-near-yet-so-far beach, check with local (city or county) authorities. They should be able to fill you in regarding ordinances/ regulations /permits and whether you might need state or federal permits. For example, if you are planning a 'tower system', it may require access for heavy equipment at beach level. Are there seasons when this is not allowed (e.g., smelt spawning)? Check with the Department of Fish and Wildlife and/or Department of Ecology. Will you need to cross private beaches? Your local government offices may

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also have useful tips and/or lists of geologists, engineers, and contractors experienced in such projects. As your planning begins to jell, be sure to:

- (1) Explore all options for a communal (at least including adjacent neighbors) system where practical. This will minimize the individual construction and maintenance costs and offer more options as to route (taking advantage of topography). Such a joint ownership system will also have less impact on bluff stability and visual intrusion on the beach than individual systems (i.e., one set of stairs vs. three or four). It need not reduce privacy at individual homesites (e.g., properties can have individual gates and upper stairs that merge via trails in mid-bluff).
- (2) Select a contractor experienced in such work. Ask for examples of his/her projects. Visit some sites and talk to clients. Was the work completed within budget and on time? If not, why? Does the contractor listen or just gaze and nod and end up ignoring your wishes? Insist on a detailed plan. Keep records of changes.
- (3) Plan routes, construction methods, and design to minimize disturbance of bank materials and vegetation. Plan work for the dry season if possible. Have any vegetation preservation/restoration plans in detail before the work is started (e.g., can you use the base of that old-growth fir as a stable stair landing, bridge abutment, or resting bench without disturbing it? How and when can you best eradicate and replace that patch of blackberry and ivy with non-invasive native species?)
- (4) Develop an overall access system that is as 'spread out' horizontally as practical. (One more reason to share the project with neighbors.) Thus, a small slide is less able to wipe out the entire system. Establish 'weak links' so that the loss of a stairway segment, for example, will not tear away the adjacent small bridge. Remember that this is a very dynamic environment and what you see today may be nothing like conditions during a rainstorm-on-snow event such as that in early January 1997.
- (5) Depending on the level of complexity (e.g., a sky bridge/tower system with electric elevator for wheelchair access), you may need an engineer. Even for seemingly simple systems such as an aerial tram, while not a challenge for the right contractor, may require the services of a specialized consultant or factory representative. (A defective brake or flaw in the clamping or swaging of the suspension cable can get someone killed.)
- (6) Where feasible, integrate the access system with any storm drainage system. This will make inspection and maintenance of the latter easier. But try to assure that any potential breaks in the storm drain are not in a position that could wash out vital (expensive) access system segments.
- (7) Remember, your access can work both ways. If you don't like strangers popping into your yard during your family barbecue, you have three options: A—Hope that 'no trespassing' signs will be effective; B—Give up on the whole idea; don't build it; C—Build a 'gate' into the system at the location where it cannot be readily bypassed. A small deck with a lockable trapdoor near the top of a vertical bank has worked well in places. A gate in the middle of a long stair segment may also be an option.

