



City of Santa Barbara

Sustainability Committee Agenda Report

Agenda Date: June 4, 2026

To: Sustainability Council Committee

From: Adaptation & Resilience Division, Sustainability & Resilience Department

Subject: Feedback Received on Options for Waterfront Adaptation Plan

Recommendation:

That the Sustainability Council Committee receive an update on feedback received for potential adaptations to be studied further in the upcoming Waterfront Adaptation Plan.

Executive Summary:

High wave events are causing erosion and flooding that regularly impact infrastructure, operations, and access along the Waterfront. These impacts are expected to worsen with sea level rise. The Waterfront Adaptation Plan aims to develop practical solutions to address coastal flooding and erosion for at least the next 30 years, while enhancing beach access, recreation, boating, and habitat.

Over four months, Staff conducted extensive outreach on potential adaptation options that could be included in the Draft Waterfront Plan (anticipated Spring 2027). This included advisory body meetings, stakeholder meetings, community events, open houses, digital communications, mailed notices, surveys, and Spanish-language engagement. The City received 1,404 survey responses, in addition to verbal and written comments.

Feedback was broadly supportive of the Plan's proactive approach and key priorities, including saving the sandy beaches through strategic relocation of parking and other assets, improving the resilience of the Harbor Commercial Area with a rock revetment

topped with a pedestrian promenade, enhancing West Beach through stormwater improvements, and creating a safer walking and biking path along the Waterfront that is elevated to limit inland flooding from the ocean.

Across users and outreach methods, there was a strong and consistent preference for more nature-based solutions, such as building offshore reefs that create habitat, restoring kelp forests and habitat, and creating sand dunes. Many shared that they value open and natural beauty, cultural connection, and simplicity over commercial pursuits, increased development, and complicated engineered solutions. There was also support voiced for consideration of groins and headlands, with a preference to pursue those options later, when required for hazard protection purposes. There was mixed feedback on the option of a new multi-story parking garage on the north side of Shoreline Drive. Similarly, parking near the Harbor remains a topic of concern and feedback was split on the option of converting some existing parking within the Harbor Main Lot to other uses that could generate revenues to fund operations and infrastructure improvements. Throughout the outreach process, and especially from City advisory bodies, the most frequently asked questions and concerns related to funding for Plan improvements.

Specific requests have been made by some stakeholders and community groups, including:

- California Coastal Commission and California Coastal Conservancy staff were generally supportive of the overall project direction, with a preference for nature-based solutions and measures that save the sandy beach. Staff accepted that the Harbor Commercial Area needs to be protected in place with a hard structure and were supportive of public access improvements.
- Chumash community members emphasized nature-based adaptation approaches, including kelp restoration, and expressed interest in a cultural facility for gathering, education, and tomol storage.

- Environmental organizations supported dune and estuary restoration, stormwater treatment at West Beach, prioritizing native species, and minimizing shoreline armoring.
- Harbor users requested expanded boat storage, enhanced launch ramp and washdown facilities, and additional parking.
- Recreational users emphasized preserving surf breaks, restrooms, small watercraft storage, and volleyball courts.
- Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) representatives emphasized protecting existing campus and stadium facilities and a preference that any future parking structure occur on the west side of Loma Alta and integrate student-serving uses.

Additional technical analysis will be conducted this summer. Staff anticipate returning to the Committee in conjunction with outreach for a draft Plan in Spring 2027.

Discussion:

Background

The City's Adaptation & Resilience Program prepares our community for climate-related impacts like sea level rise, flooding, erosion, and wildfire. The Waterfront Adaptation Plan primarily focuses on coastal hazards south of Cabrillo Boulevard and is one of several major Program initiatives, alongside a regional coastal monitoring pilot project, stormwater and flood modeling, and adaptation projects for the City's wastewater, water, and airport infrastructure. Additional information on the Program was presented to City Council on December 9, 2025, and is available at SantaBarbaraCA.gov/Adaptation.

Project Overview

The Waterfront is a cherished community resource and economic driver that faces growing challenges from beach erosion and flooding that are causing damage, disruption, and rapidly narrowing East Beach. These challenges are anticipated to grow with sea level rise.

The purpose of the Waterfront Adaptation Plan is to develop practical solutions to address coastal flooding and erosion for the next 30 years, while enhancing beach access, recreation, boating, and habitat. The Plan is funded by the California Coastal Commission, the California Coastal Conservancy, and the City.

The current Plan focus is selecting adaptation options to evaluate in detail for feasibility, effectiveness, timing, and cost. A draft Waterfront Adaptation Plan with a recommended approach, funding strategy, and implementation pathway is anticipated in Spring 2027.

More details on the project are available at SantaBarbaraCA.gov/WaterfrontAdaptation.

Initial Preliminary List of Options Under Consideration

In early 2026, the project team completed an initial screening of the full spectrum of potential measures that reduce coastal hazard risks. This effort resulted in a streamlined list of potential options that appear most appropriate, provide multiple benefits, and advance the project's core design objectives of:

- Saving the sandy beach and enhancing recreation;
- Protecting the working Harbor;
- Protecting inland areas from ocean flooding;
- Providing a safe and separated walking and biking path along the entire Waterfront; and
- Ensuring economic viability.

This preliminary list of options was developed to provide a starting point for initial conversations with regulatory agencies, local decisionmakers, stakeholders, and our greater community about potential Plan outcomes. Key preliminary options include:

- Immediate “quick win” projects like temporary deployable flood control measures, minor drainage improvements, and restriping the Harbor West and Leadbetter parking lots to create a separated walking and biking path that addresses pressing transportation safety concerns.

- Strategically relocating some parking, restrooms, walking and biking paths, park areas, and commercial facilities at Leadbetter and East Beach to allow the shoreline to naturally move inland and remain sandy. Options exist to phase relocations. For example, Shoreline Café and the adjacent Leadbetter restrooms could remain in their current locations until specified hazard thresholds are met, at which point they could be relocated inland.
- Implementing additional beach nourishment, berms, and dunes to retain and enhance sandy beach areas.
- Improving stormwater drainage at West Beach to enhance sand quality and adding amenities such as restrooms and showers to establish West Beach as a premier sandy beach destination.
- Protecting the Harbor Commercial Area with a revetment that reduces flooding and erosion and is topped by a pedestrian promenade that expands public access.
- Exploring improvements to the Harbor Commercial Area and adjacent parking lots to expand boating support services, increase public access, support coastal uses, and add new economic development opportunities that generate revenue and support Plan implementation.
- Providing a safe, continuous, and separated walking and biking path along the entire Waterfront. This path could be elevated to reduce the risk of inland flooding and erosion.
- Considering additional, longer-term adaptation options that may be needed in the future and are more difficult to fund and permit, such as groins, headlands, and offshore reefs.

More detail on this preliminary list of options was presented at the March 10, 2026, Council meeting.

Community Engagement

Community support is foundational to the ultimate success of the Waterfront Adaptation Plan. To facilitate meaningful early input from our community on potential conceptual

design options, a robust outreach process was conducted from late February through the end of May. Deliberate effort was made to reach a cross-section of our community and users with diverse perspectives and needs. This included direct engagement of the Spanish-speaking community by our partners in the Promotores Network. A summary of key engagement methods is summarized in the following table.

Engagement Category	Total
<p>City Advisory Body Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Council (March 10) • Harbor Commission (March 19) • Parks & Rec Commission (March 25) • Planning Commission (April 9) • Neighborhood Advisory Committee (April 13) • Creeks Advisory Committee (April 15) • Youth Council (April 20) • Transportation & Circulation Committee (April 23) • Access Advisory Committee (May 15) • Historic Landmarks Commission (May 20) • Architectural Board of Review (May 26) • Council Sustainability Committee (June 4) 	12 meetings
<p>Partner Coordination Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy groups • Chumash community • City leadership • Front-line tenants • Industry professionals • Neighboring jurisdictions • Regulatory & funding agencies 	27 meetings

Engagement Category	Total
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Santa Barbara City College leadership 	
<p>Community Events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Santa Barbara Earth Day Festival (staffed two days) • Santa Barbara City College Earth Day Festival (staffed) • Clean Sweep (informational materials) • Fisherman’s Market (informational materials) • Pop-up at Chase Palm Park (staffed) • Tuesday & Saturday Farmers Markets (informational materials) • 1st Thursday (informational materials) • Harbor Swap Meet (staffed) 	10 events
<p>Open Houses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faulkner Gallery • Maritime Museum • Zoom webinar 	3 open houses
<p>Digital Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City News in Briefs • City Social Media • City Sustainability & Resilience Newsletters • County of Santa Barbara Sustainability Newsletter • Docklines Waterfront Department Newsletter • Nextdoor Events and Posts • Press Releases • Project Newsletters • Project Website • Visit Santa Barbara Newsletters 	30 communications >140,000 audience reach, contacted multiple times

Engagement Category	Total
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waterfront Leaseholder emails 	
Posted Informational Materials Along the Waterfront	12 A frames
Mailed Notices to Tenants and Property Owners	>1,300 notices
Survey Responses	1,404 responses (92 in Spanish)

Feedback Received

Staff was encouraged by the high level of community participation and the thoughtful, substantive feedback received throughout the engagement process. Demographic data from the community survey indicates that most participants live in Santa Barbara or the immediate surrounding area, or work in Santa Barbara. This suggests that feedback received is representative of our community and key users. The wide range of elements and experiences identified by participants underscored the Waterfront’s role as a deeply valued and cherished community resource. Key themes heard throughout the outreach process and across outreach methods are summarized below:

- Strong appreciation for the Waterfront as it exists today, with minor tweaks.**

A consistent theme across outreach activities was the community’s strong connection to and appreciation for the Waterfront as it exists today. Many expressed a desire to preserve the elements that they enjoy and use today. Others mentioned prioritizing solutions that maintain the Waterfront’s open, scenic, and largely undeveloped qualities. Community members emphasized improving everyday Waterfront amenities and accessibility through additional restrooms, expanded special events, increased opportunities for small businesses, and affordable amenities and services that prioritize residents.

- **Awareness, acknowledgement, and appreciation.**

There was a broad awareness of the erosion challenges at East Beach and the recent storm impacts along the Waterfront, acknowledgement that sea level rise requires action, and appreciation that the City is responding to these issues.

- **General support for project direction.**

Most agreed that the preliminary list of options was generally headed in the right direction and should continue to be studied further. This was consistently heard at City advisory body, partner, and community meetings.

- **Strong support for nature-based solutions.**

There was overwhelming support for nature-based solutions across audiences and user-groups. There was a consistent desire to further highlight and prioritize solutions like building offshore reefs that create habitat, restoring kelp forests and habitat, and creating sand dunes. Many highlighted that improving the marine environment would support fishing, diving, eco-tourism, our community's connection with nature, and the blue economy. When asked whether these solutions should continue to be considered, 88% of survey respondents said yes, 9% said maybe, and 3% said no.

- **Strong support for transportation safety and public access improvements.**

There was strong support for options that improve transportation safety, including closing gaps in the existing networks and providing separate paths for people to walk and bike. Some mentioned the need to create better connections for people traveling between the Waterfront, lower Downtown, and other key destinations. Others emphasized the need to improve public transit and restore the Waterfront Shuttle. There was universal support for enhanced public access, including making ADA improvements and designing for people of all ages and abilities.

- **Support for the elevated walking and biking path option, with mixed preference on location.**

There was general support for the elevated walking and biking path as a solution to improve transportation safety and address flooding issues. However, there was less agreement on its ideal location, with some preferring it closer to the ocean and more preferring it inland. In the survey, 28% of respondents preferred it to be closer to the ocean, 42% preferred it further inland, 13% might support raising the path, and 17% didn't support raising the path.

- **Strong Support for options under consideration at Leadbetter Beach, with mixed feedback on new parking garages.**

There was general support for the options under consideration at Leadbetter Beach to save the sandy beach while enhancing recreation. When asked whether these options should continue to be considered, 71% of survey respondents said yes, 17% said maybe, and 12% said no. There was mixed reception to the option of adding new multi-story parking on the north side of Shoreline Drive, with some in support, some suggesting that money be better spent to support transit and other forms of sustainable transportation, others suggesting it include a restaurant component. When asked what to prioritize at Leadbetter Beach, sandy beach was by far the most popular survey response (65%), followed by paths to walk and bike (53%), protected habitat areas (45%), park green space and picnic areas (37%), and restrooms and showers (24%).

- **Support for options under consideration at the Harbor Commercial Area.**

There was general support for the options under consideration at the Harbor Commercial Area to protect it in place, while prioritizing public access and boating. When asked whether these options should continue to be considered, 70% of survey respondents said yes, 18% said maybe, and 12% said no. As described below, there was mixed reception to options that impact parking. When asked what to prioritize, paths to walk and bike was the most popular survey response (57%),

followed by onshore boating support facilities (39%); food, beverages, and concessions (35%); parking (30%); and sandy beach (27%).

- **Strong support for rock revetment with pedestrian promenade at the Harbor Commercial Area.**

There was strong support for this option to protect the harbor commercial area in place, while improving public access. When asked whether this option should continue to be considered, 74% of survey respondents said yes, 14% said maybe, and 12% said no.

- **Split feedback for economic development in the Harbor Main Parking Lot.**

There was mixed reception to the option of converting some parking in the Harbor Main Parking Lot to other uses that could generate revenue, like boating support facilities and restaurants, to fund ongoing Waterfront operations and infrastructure improvements from the Waterfront Adaptation Plan. When asked whether this option should continue to be considered, 44% of survey respondents said yes, 19% said maybe, and 37% said no. Demand for easy, available, cheap, and close parking was a consistent theme heard from Harbor users.

- **Strong support for options under consideration at West Beach.**

There was strong support for the options under consideration to reimagine this beach as a premiere sandy beach destination. When asked whether these options should continue to be considered, 76% of survey respondents said yes, 15% said maybe, and 10% said no. When asked what to prioritize, sandy beach area was by far the most popular survey response (62%), followed by paths to walk and bike (50%), protected habitat area (32%); sports areas, including volleyball courts (27%); and restrooms and showers (27%). Frequently raised concerns were water quality, proximity to the Harbor, and parking availability.

- **Strong support for options under consideration at East Beach.**

There was strong support for the options at East Beach that save the sandy beach while enhancing recreation. When asked whether these options should continue to

be considered, 77% of survey respondents said yes, 13% said maybe, and 11% said no. When asked what to prioritize, sandy beach area was by far the most popular survey response (62%), followed closely by paths to walk and bike (55%), then protected habitat area (37%); sports areas, including volleyball courts (33%); and park green space and picnic areas (24%).

- **Support for groins and headlands, with mixed preference on timing.**

There was support for sand retention devices like groins, headlands, and offshore reefs to widen beaches and address the erosion, with a greater preference for timing construction for when they're required for hazard protection. Interest in groins and headlands was primarily focused on East Beach. When asked whether these options should continue to be considered, 46% of survey responses said yes, but only when required for flooding and erosion protection; 21% said yes, and consider building them sooner to widen the beaches; 16% said maybe, and 17% said no.

- **Question and concern over funding and implementation.**

Across outreach methods and user groups, the most frequently asked questions related to funding, feasibility, and implementation. There was general awareness and concern of existing City budget challenges and changes in the availability of federal funding.

- **There is a diverse range of users, stakeholders, and needs to consider.**

In addition to the broader themes described above, extensive feedback was received regarding the needs and perspectives of specific stakeholders and user groups. While outreach captured input from a broad range of participants, Staff recognizes that not all Waterfront stakeholders participated directly in the outreach process and that the Waterfront Adaptation Plan must continue to consider the full range of users and needs. Highlighted recommendations include, but are not limited to:

California Coastal Commission and California Coastal Conservancy

- Support strategically relocating assets inland to save the sandy beach.
- Accept that the Harbor Commercial Area needs to be protected in place, with a rock revetment or other hard structure. There was support for a public access component being integrated into the protection measure.
- Desire for more nature-based solutions and sand dunes.
- Understand the need for the raised walking and biking paths, but prefer them being sited to avoid acting as a seawall that could narrow adjacent sandy beach areas.

Chumash Community

- Prioritize natural solutions like kelp forest restoration and offshore reefs. Avoid using man-made solutions to address man-made problems.
- Create an educational and meeting facility for the Chumash community, with covered tomol and diving equipment storage, in the Harbor Commercial Area or West Beach.
- Create space for Chumash sculptures, art, murals, and educational material.

Environmental Nonprofits

- Consider how beaches are used for refuge during extreme heat events and add shade structures.
- Minimize shoreline armoring and prioritize nature-based adaptation strategies, habitat restoration, water quality improvements, and strategic relocation of vulnerable infrastructure.
- Prioritize a native, natural experience at West Beach over new lawn areas.
- Avoid the use of artificial turf along the Waterfront.
- Consider Mission Creek and Sycamore Creek estuary areas.

Harbor Users

- Add more storage and facilities that support boating.
- Improve parking for liveaboards and other Harbor users, especially during weekends, holidays, and other high demand weekends.

- Improve the Harbor boat launch ramp facilities, including the washdown station and additional parking for boat trailers.

Recreational Users

- Preserve existing surf breaks at Leadbetter Beach and Sandspit for surfers.
- Preserve shower, changing, and bathroom facilities at Leadbetter Beach for ocean swimmers.
- Preserve small boat, canoe, and tomol storage for users at West Beach.
- Preserve volleyball courts at East Beach for beach volleyball players.

SBCC Leadership

- Locate any future multi-story parking garages on the west side of Loma Alta. Consider a dining component for students.
- Prioritize options that protect the stadium and SBCC facilities.

Formal comment letters were received by Santa Barbara Channelkeeper and Heal the Ocean, which are included as Attachment 1.

Next Steps

The consultant team will conduct additional technical analysis and modeling this summer and, informed by input received through the community engagement process, begin preparation of the Waterfront Adaptation Plan. Plan development will occur in close coordination with the core interdepartmental Staff team, including representatives from the Waterfront, Parks & Recreation, Public Works, and Sustainability & Resilience Departments. An administrative draft will be reviewed by the broader City team, as well as staff from the California Coastal Commission and California Coastal Conservancy, prior to release of the public draft Plan next Spring. Staff anticipate returning to the Committee in conjunction with outreach for the draft Plan.

Budget/Financial Information:

Funding for preparation of the Plan and preliminary design drawings for targeted Core Measures are fully funded by the California Coastal Commission, the State Coastal

Conservancy, and the City. Quick Win projects are envisioned to be implemented with existing City budgets. Final design and construction of Core Measures and Future Options are not yet funded and will require substantial external funding. The Plan will explore opportunities to incorporate new and expanded revenue generation into design solutions to support implementation. A comprehensive funding strategy will be developed in the next phase of the planning effort and will likely include a mix of State and Federal grants, low-interest loans, City funds, and other local sources. Additionally, the Adaptation and Resilience Division will be undertaking a holistic funding strategy study, separately from this effort, that will evaluate longer term funding options and innovative, sustainable funding concepts.

Sustainability Impact:

The Waterfront Adaptation Plan advances goals contained in the General Plan, Local Coastal Program, Climate Action Plan, and Citywide 2021 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Plan to better understand vulnerabilities to existing and future hazards and enhance our community's resilience to climate change.

Attachment:

1. Formal Comment Letters Recieved

Prepared By: Timmy Bolton, Senior Climate Adaptation Analyst

Submitted By: Alelia Parenteau, Sustainability & Resilience Director

Approved By: Kelly McAdoo, City Administrator



May 15, 2026

Melissa Hetrick, Adaptation and Resilience Manager
Timmy Bolton, Senior Climate Adaptation Analyst
City of Santa Barbara Sustainability and Resilience Department
801 Garden Street, Suite 200
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

RE: City of Santa Barbara 30 Year Waterfront Adaptation Plan

Dear Ms. Hetrick and Mr. Bolton,

Santa Barbara Channelkeeper's mission is to protect and restore the Santa Barbara Channel and its watersheds. We maintain a strong connection to the waterfront through our on-the-water programs aboard the *R/V Channelkeeper*, beach cleanups, and advocacy work for clean water and healthy habitats.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide early feedback on the City of Santa Barbara's 30 Year Waterfront Adaptation Plan and the potential options that were shared with community members last month. We also welcome the effort the City is taking through surveys, information booths at local events, and open houses to inform and engage the community about ideas for addressing coastal flooding, erosion, and sea level rise, and for enhancing their connections with the waterfront area.

As the City continues to plan for the long-term future of Santa Barbara's waterfront, we strongly encourage the planning team to continue to focus on nature-based adaptation strategies that improve water quality, enhance the recreational experience of residents and visitors, restore coastal habitat, and strengthen long-term resilience to sea level rise.

The following comments highlight several key areas where the Plan has an important opportunity to establish a strong foundation for science-based coastal adaptation.

- **Prioritize Habitat Protection and Restoration**

Protecting, restoring, and enhancing the natural systems that help support a healthy, economically vibrant, and resilient coastline should be a key focus of this Plan, in addition to minimizing coastal hazards that put critical infrastructure at risk. We encourage the City to prioritize healthy and functioning coastal habitats in the Plan because they are foundational to recreation, public access, visitor experience, and the long-term resilience of the waterfront. These systems also filter stormwater, retain and transport sediment, buffer flooding and wave impacts, and support nearshore ecosystems.

People come to the waterfront to enjoy the natural beauty, beaches, ocean, and recreational opportunities that make Santa Barbara unique. The beaches, creeks, estuaries/lagoons, and nearshore environment are all interconnected aspects of that experience.

Without healthy and functioning coastal systems, the environmental quality and recreational experience that residents and visitors come to enjoy will be compromised. This could lead to long-term impacts on recreation, tourism, public access, coastal resilience, and the overall value of the waterfront to the community and local economy.

- **Integrate nature-based adaptation strategies in the Plan**

We appreciate the City's inclusion of nature-based adaptation strategies within the Plan and encourage the planning team to continue prioritizing adaptation strategies that restore and work with naturally occurring coastal systems and processes.

When we refer to nature-based adaptation strategies, we mean projects that restore or enhance naturally occurring coastal systems and processes, including dune restoration, estuary and lagoon enhancement, creek restoration, and projects that provide additional space for coastal habitats to migrate inland as sea levels rise.

These approaches can provide multiple benefits, including improved water quality, habitat enhancement, sediment retention, ecological resilience, recreational value, and coastal resilience.

While we recognize that some highly developed shoreline areas may require a combination of adaptation approaches, we encourage the City to fully evaluate nature based strategies wherever they can reduce long-term reliance on seawalls, rock revetments, and other hardened shoreline infrastructure

- **Pursue Strategic Relocation Opportunities**

We support the City's inclusion of early strategic relocation concepts for vulnerable infrastructure and public amenities within the Plan. Concepts such as relocating infrastructure and parking away from the shoreline at Leadbetter Beach, transitioning portions of grassy areas at East Beach to coastal dunes, and shifting a row of volleyball courts towards Cabrillo Boulevard are effective and forward-looking adaptation strategies

that can help maintain sandy beaches and create additional space for natural shoreline migration as sea levels rise.

These approaches can improve shoreline resilience while supporting public access, recreation, and habitat enhancement on the waterfront. Creating additional space for coastal dunes and natural shoreline processes will improve the adaptive flexibility of the waterfront over time.

Strategic relocation can reduce long-term reliance on hardened shoreline infrastructure and provide greater long-term public and environmental benefits than shoreline armoring strategies in certain areas.

- **Incorporate Mission Creek and Sycamore Creek Estuaries into the Plan**

We were disappointed that the Mission Creek and Sycamore Creek lagoon and estuary areas do not appear to be specifically included in the materials describing the options for the Plan framework. These estuarine systems should be incorporated as core priorities within the East Beach section of the Plan. These areas present important opportunities to improve habitat, ecological function, water quality, and shoreline resilience naturally.

Mission Creek and Sycamore Creek influence how stormwater, sediment, pollutants, and urban runoff move through the waterfront environment and ultimately impact beach conditions, public health, habitat and water quality, and the visitor experience at East Beach.

Enhancing the functionality of these estuarine systems is especially important given the ongoing water quality issues affecting the waterfront, particularly near creek outfalls and storm discharge locations where urban runoff and elevated bacteria levels impact public health and recreational use.

- **Address Stormwater Issues at West Beach in Ways that Do Not Shift the Pollution Problem Offshore**

We appreciate the City's recognition that West Beach presents an important opportunity to maintain a wide sandy beach, improve the visitor experience, and address existing flooding and stormwater drainage challenges. A premier beach experience must include clean water for residents and visitors.

We are concerned that consolidating storm drain outflows into a single untreated discharge location near Stearns Wharf could negatively affect nearshore water quality, public health, and the overall beach experience. Investments intended to improve the beach experience should also prioritize improving nearshore water quality conditions and avoid creating new environmental impacts.

The City should evaluate options such as bioswales, dunes, infiltration strategies, and other green infrastructure features that can treat and filter stormwater before it reaches the beach and nearshore environment. We would like to see the City consider opportunities to daylight portions of the storm drainage system into an east-west bioswale along the southern edge of Cabrillo Boulevard, that ultimately connects to Mission Creek. While this could lead to periodic inundation during large storms, it could provide opportunities to slow, filter, and infiltrate stormwater before it reaches the ocean.

Finally, as the City considers elevating West Beach as a sandy beach destination, it should immediately commit to more regular water quality monitoring program at West Beach that helps inform beachgoers, collects baseline information, and supports long-term water quality management.

- **Take a Cautious and Limited Approach to Shoreline Armoring**

We encourage the city to take a cautious and limited approach to hardened shoreline infrastructure, including rock revetments, seawalls, and other shoreline armoring strategies. Expanded shoreline armoring can lead to beaches narrowing, coastal squeeze, habitat degradation, disruption of sediment movement, and reduced shoreline adaptability.

While some engineered infrastructure may be needed in select locations, these approaches should only be pursued where no feasible nature-based or strategic relocation alternatives exist. If shoreline protection infrastructure is pursued, the City should incorporate habitat enhancement and nature-based elements wherever possible to help reduce ecological impacts.

We would appreciate additional information regarding the proposed expansion of rock revetments, particularly at the Harbor Commercial Area, and how these concepts would seek to avoid or minimize impacts on beaches, habitat, and coastal processes.

- **Maintain a Clear Distinction Between Resilience Planning and Economic Development Projects**

We encourage the City to maintain a clear distinction between coastal resilience planning and unrelated commercial development projects. The primary focus of the Waterfront Adaptation Plan should remain on long-term shoreline resilience, ecological function, water quality, habitat protection, public access, and recreation.

- **Evaluate Beach Nourishment Impacts and Long-Term Costs**

While beach nourishment may provide temporary shoreline benefits, repeated sand placement can impact nearshore ecosystems, degrade water quality, alter sediment dynamics, and lead to ongoing and elevated maintenance costs. We encourage the City to carefully evaluate the long-term ecological and financial implications of nourishment

strategies as the plan moves forward, including potential impacts to nearshore species and habitat, water quality, public access and recreation, and long-term financial burden.

From Leadbetter Point and the Harbor to Mission Creek, Sycamore Creek, East Beach, and the nearshore environment, the waterfront is one of Santa Barbara's most important public spaces. The health of the beaches, creeks, estuaries/lagoons, and nearshore waters that surround and support the waterfront directly impacts water quality, recreation, flood resilience, and the overall experience that residents and visitors come to enjoy. By restoring and strengthening these natural systems, Santa Barbara has an opportunity to protect and enhance the resilience, environmental health, recreational value, and long-term vitality of the waterfront for generations to come.

Thank you, and looking forward to continuing to engage as the plan moves forward,

Nate Irwin, Policy Associate

Santa Barbara Channelkeeper



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Sustainability & Resilience Department
801 Garden St., Suite 200
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

15 May 2026

Re: Santa Barbara Waterfront Adaptation Plan

Dear City of Santa Barbara Sustainability & Resilience Department,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide early comments on the development of the City of Santa Barbara's Waterfront Adaptation Plan. Adapting to sea level rise, coastal flooding, and beach erosion is critical for the long-term sustainability of our future coastline and community; we appreciate your work to incorporate and plan for resilience to the Santa Barbara Waterfront area (Project Area). Ongoing challenges will only be exacerbated into the future without meaningful actions to improve coastal resilience.

Heal the Ocean (HTO) is a 501(c)3 non-profit environmental organization that focuses on reducing ocean pollution and providing science-based solutions to improve the health of our oceans and resilience of our coasts to benefit people and wildlife. We are focused on Santa Barbara County, and our methods serve as models for other coastal communities across the country. HTO has been deeply involved in coastal adaptation and resilience planning work throughout the region, including work across multiple jurisdictions. HTO's Executive Director, Karina Johnston, has extensive experience in climate adaptation planning and implementation, especially in planning, implementing, and monitoring nature-based adaptation projects. We are grateful to City staff in the Sustainability and Resilience Department who have done extensive early outreach for this plan, including meeting with us as well as public presentations.

HTO would like to stress the importance of implementing nature-based adaptation solutions (NbS) and those relating to strategic infrastructure relocation or managed retreat whenever possible. These should be priority projects within the Waterfront Adaptation Plan, especially as long-term solutions. NbS incorporates the goal of preserving, protecting, or restoring coastal ecosystems to enhance the resilience of the coast, while providing multi-benefit outcomes. NbS, such as dune or wetland restoration projects, can adapt naturally to changing coastal conditions. HTO is available to partner, support, or lead habitat restoration projects in support of coastal

resilience. Conversely, hard infrastructure additions such as sea walls, groins, and revetments often cause substantial erosion at the site of installation or adjacent and can lead to the disappearance of beaches, coastal access points, and recreational opportunities. We feel strongly that these hard infrastructure additions should be avoided whenever possible, as they do not provide multi-benefit outcomes.

Although a full spectrum of adaptation solutions should be considered in a “toolbox”, we strongly suggest selecting natural or nature-based solutions whenever possible throughout the Project Area. Additionally, the City may want to consider merging some of the ‘immediate fixes’ with the interim and long-term solutions where possible to be more cost effective. Consider a phased approach such as the project implemented at Surfer’s Point in Ventura County as an example, which implemented infrastructure relocation as well as habitat restoration along two adjoining reaches of Surfer’s Point.

The following comments are grouped for each reach within the Project Area.

Leadbetter Beach:

Leadbetter Beach has a substantial amount of infrastructure that is vulnerable to sea level rise, including a public restroom, Shoreline Café, parking lots, picnic area, and other public facilities. In lieu of new walls or other hardened structures, long-term planning should relocate the vulnerable infrastructure further from shore, including exploring the full removal of the parking lots and potential creation of new multi-level parking structures north of Shoreline Dr. (e.g., SBCC Lot 3 & 2-C). The Surfer’s Point project is a particularly successful model that could be applied to the Leadbetter Beach area. The long-term plan should include relocating both the restroom and Shoreline Café, removing the parking lots, and restoring dunes with boardwalks for public access to the beach, with long-term planning beginning now. One option could be to start the first phase with the western parking lot and associated infrastructure, which usually has less public use than the other parking areas. Merging short term and long-term activities could be more cost-effective in the long-term through a phased approach.

In the short term, implementing dune restoration at Leadbetter Beach could serve as a great educational opportunity and a NbS demonstration project. Enhancement of the existing invasive iceplant covered dunes should occur through removing invasive iceplant and replacing it with native dune species. This site could serve as a great demonstration and teaching model about nature-based solutions to sea level rise and improved resilience, including the potential for interpretive signs and public access features. This could be done in a cost-effective manner that would allow for integration into the larger and long-term resilience work. HTO is available to help lead or partner on this restoration project, including applying for grants to support the work.

Additionally, careful consideration should be given to the existing grassy lawn and picnic areas. The footprint of the park facilities should be reduced considerably and the non-native grasses replaced with native dune and coastal strand species. Grass and lawns do not belong on a beach, and there are other ways to enhance recreational opportunities. If a foredune is allowed to form or is restored in front of the picnic area, it will help trap sand and provide a buffer from flooding. Picnic tables could eventually be moved much closer to Shoreline Dr., once the parking lots are relocated. Whenever possible, beach lawns should be replaced with native species, especially as there are limited places in Santa Barbara to be able to restore functioning dunes (see also East Beach notes).

Any beach nourishment activities should be carefully planned and monitored to reduce ecological impacts. HTO can provide specific recommendations upon request, including opportunities to reduce ecological impacts such as appropriate timing and placement options. Additionally, if nourishment is planned, dune restoration should be considered as a component of nourishment activities, adding sand to the back beach area and seeding with native vegetation to create a natural flood protection buffer. Lastly, we recommend halting beach grooming activities across all Santa Barbara beaches. Beaches that are allowed to be natural generally have higher resilience and stronger ecological functions and physical processes.

Harbor Area:

Several areas of the Harbor currently experience flooding, especially areas in and adjacent to the Yacht Club, parking lot, and along the revetment. Although nature-based solutions are not as feasible in this area, care should be taken to balance flood protection needs with recreational opportunities. For example, an elevated pedestrian walkway could be a recreational and public access benefit, if combined with flood protection elements. We also encourage the City to maintain a clear distinction between coastal resilience and adaptation planning and unrelated commercial development projects (e.g., new store development), especially in the Harbor reach of the Project Area. The primary focus of the plan should remain on improved resilience, ecological functions, water quality, habitat protection, recreation, and public access. Although there are considerations, such as parking, that need to be addressed holistically across the Project Area, new development should not be framed as a coastal resilience or adaptation project. New development would just create more infrastructure vulnerable to flooding.

The Harbor area experiences recurring challenges with water quality issues. There is a strong need for a more comprehensive water quality study or monitoring program that encompasses the Harbor area as well as West Beach / East Beach. Fecal indicator bacteria (FIB) often exhibit exceedances in the Harbor area and West Beach, and an understanding of the sources and challenges relating to water quality issues is vital. FIB DNA studies and other water quality monitoring could help to inform some of the pollution sources. Once a thorough study is completed, work can focus on reducing sources of water pollution, either through redirection of

stormdrains, enhanced outreach about sewage pumpout stations, or other water quality improvements. Maintaining a more robust ongoing water quality monitoring program with reports and information made easily accessible to the public will promote water quality transparency and also protect public health while enhancing the appeal of West Beach and Harbor areas to beachgoers.

West Beach:

The current stormdrain configuration discharges substantial water flows and results in ponding on West Beach. This ponding and discharge is a significant issue which discourages recreation (especially during the wet season), causes flooding, impacts beach water quality, and changes the physical structure and quality of the sand. The resulting sand quality is not ideal for NbS, such as dunes, or for shifting recreational activities to West Beach, e.g., volleyball. This section of beach should be part of a comprehensive water quality study (see Harbor section above), which may lead to relocating stormwater outfall sites. The suggestion to relocate the stormdrain to under the wharf may just be redirecting a water quality issue to another location. Instead, a comprehensive water quality solution should also evaluate whether water flow could be directed to Mission Creek and combined with wetland restoration and enhancements, treated through Best Management Practices (BMPs), or treated through other processes. Since West Beach is the least vulnerable beach to sea level rise and presents a good opportunity for recreational activities, a deep understanding of water quality issues is vital to finding comprehensive resilience solutions.

West Beach also presents a unique opportunity for small dunes in combination with elevated boardwalks and interpretive signs (e.g., Surfer's Point, Carpinteria State Beach). This would provide enhanced opportunities for recreation, education, aesthetic benefits, and more. With low wind speeds on average and limited new sand availability, the dunes would be likely to stay low in height and vertical structure, which would continue to allow good line-of-sight from Cabrillo Blvd. to the ocean, while still providing a buffer from coastal flooding. This type of project could be combined with an elevated bike or pedestrian path, and would still allow for beach volleyball activities oceanward of the dunes. Keeping volleyball courts in a small footprint would also allow for natural sand movement across the beach. One relevant example is a dune restoration project that our Executive Director implemented in Manhattan Beach, CA, which allowed for immediately adjacent volleyball courts to be maintained and heavily utilized, and simultaneous support for many types of beach recreation. This project recently won an award from the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association.

New additions of lawns and grass should not be considered at all on sandy beach habitat. There is limited opportunity for native beach and dune species to thrive in the Santa Barbara area, so care should be taken to prioritize the use of native species for any addition of vegetation in sandy habitats. Similarly, new development should not occur on the beach. For development projects, such as new restrooms, showers, concessions, etc., the City should consider options within

existing developed areas that are adjacent to West Beach and the Harbor. Existing developed areas may also provide relocation opportunities for some of the infrastructure.

East Beach:

East Beach is highly vulnerable to sea level rise and erosion because of its orientation and width. Additionally, there is a substantial amount of vulnerable coastal infrastructure along this reach, including the skate park, parking lot next to Mission Creek, Palm Park Beach House, bike path, public restroom, Cabrillo Blvd., and Cabrillo Pavillion. Long-term planning should incorporate the relocation or eventual removal of as much coastal infrastructure as possible. No new infrastructure (e.g., bike or pedestrian path) should be built in vulnerable areas, as it would just create a future challenge with rising sea levels.

The current grassy areas adjacent to and on East Beach could be prioritized for short term removal, creating more space for beach recreation and improved public access to sandy beach areas. For example, the large grassy area on the western side of East Beach could be removed and prioritized for NbS features. Additionally, there is opportunity for enhancement of the current vegetated areas through removal of iceplant, irrigation, and sand fencing that blocks the dunes from performing natural dynamic processes. Similarly, some of the picnic area footprint could be reconfigured to be in a smaller area. Opportunities should be considered to expand some of the dune areas to give a longer time frame for natural resilience.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments on the Waterfront Adaptation Plan, and we are available to answer any questions or discuss any elements in more detail. Additionally, HTO would be happy to partner or inform specific projects, such as dune or wetland restoration, as well as support outreach and engagement efforts as part of resilience planning.

Thank you for taking the time to read our comment letter. Please feel free to contact us with any questions.

Sincerely,



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