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An Alternative History of Santa Cruz County

By Frank Perry



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Imagine a 260-foot-high dam across the Soquel Valley, a submarine port at Santa Cruz, a 13-story apartment building on the beach at Capitola, or a giant nuclear power plant near Davenport. These are just a few of many projects that were proposed but never built.

Introduction

Santa Cruz County history is littered with such unrealized plans as those listed above, though most are not so dramatic. Had even a few of the major ones come to fruition, our little patch of paradise on the north shore of Monterey Bay would be very different from the place we now know. In this alternate history, there would be more heavy industry, dams, freeways, railroad lines, and housing subdivisions. There would be entire towns that do not exist today. In some respects, what didn't happen is just as important as what did.

In recent decades, the history of failed plans has increasingly become a subject for study by historians. In the fall of 2013, for example, the California Historical Society and the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) presented a five-venue exhibition titled, *Unbuilt San Francisco: The View From Futures Past*. According to exhibition curator John King, "Today's urban landscape is shaped in profound ways by the buildings that never came to life, the plans that fell short."¹

What didn't come to pass nevertheless tells us how certain people envisioned the future. Such proposals frequently prompted not just decision makers but everyday citizens to seriously examine

what kind of a future they wanted. In hindsight, some of the plans prompt chuckles, others horror. What were they thinking?

This article offers only a small sampling of such projects, which probably number in the thousands. They provide context for some of the issues of the present and future. Many current development issues have roots going back a century or more.

For inclusion here, a proposal has to have been "serious" and not just a casual comment. All of the ones discussed were significant enough to be



Proposed entrance to the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, 1930. (Courtesy City of Santa Cruz)

covered in local newspapers. Some never progressed past the idea stage, while others got as far as plans being drawn or even construction starting. Especially common are examples where a project was built, but in a manner far different from what was originally envisioned. Then there is that rare subset of projects that were actually built but never used.

Background

During the second half of the nineteenth century Santa Cruz County was a booming industrial center with lumber mills, lime kilns, tanneries, paper mills, and an explosives manufacturing plant. Heavy industry and large businesses were encouraged to establish here, and people were encouraged to settle here. In the early 1900s, as these early industries declined, Santa Cruz's economy sagged. The county courted new industries, increased tourism, and other sources of income with mixed results. By the 1970s, however, the economy had improved and the political winds began to shift. By then large developments commonly aroused political opposition. Often, those objecting the loudest were newcomers to the area who had fled the congestion, traffic, smog, and high crime rates of southern California and the San Francisco Bay area cities.²

Cement Plants

Santa Cruz has remarkably clean air, thanks in part to an unrealized plan from 1903. It was late that year that the Standard Portland Cement Company expressed interest in erecting a cement plant in the upper west side overlooking Santa Cruz. Supposedly the plant would cost about one million dollars to construct and employ about 300 people.³ Given Santa Cruz's industrial history during the nineteenth century and its declining economic situation by the early 1900s, one might think such industry would be welcomed. The reaction of citizens was not simply mixed, but sharply polarized.

Among the supporters was Frederick Augustus Hihn (aka F. A. Hihn), pioneer Santa Cruz capitalist. Hihn was part of a committee from Santa Cruz that visited a cement plant in Napa Junction to learn more how a cement plant might affect Santa Cruz. He felt that such a plant would be a boon to the area economy. Certainly there were concerns: noise from blasting and cement dust from the stacks, but Hihn felt these could be mitigated. "He says the manufacture of cement is a very money-making business, and that if outside parties are willing to

invest a million dollars here, we should aid them to do it," reported the *Santa Cruz Surf*.⁴

The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* endorsed the plan, and published the opinions of other prominent citizens in favor.⁵ "I am strongly in favor of the cement plant," said Gustav Bowman. "The more factories we have, the better it will be for the town." According to Fred. L. Stevens, "I can't express myself too strongly in favor of the cement works, for if such a manufactory is established, it means the distribution of more money in our city, and we are all after money." Mitchell Stepovich said, "A little dust will not hurt anyone."

Earlier, in 1900, the *Santa Cruz Surf* had proclaimed the new century "The Age of Cement" and noted that Santa Cruz, with its vast limestone deposits, would undoubtedly supply large quantities of it.⁶ It was not long, however, before some residents began to have misgivings about a cement plant looming over downtown. Despite its declaration three years earlier, the *Santa Cruz Surf* editorialized against the plant. By March 1904, a number of prominent Santa Cruzans agreed. These included Fred Swanton, Stephen Grover, Harley Irish, Mary Fagen, C. D. Hinkle, Edward van Cleek, Henry Willey, Frank Heath, and others.⁷

The Standard Portland Cement Company apparently thought it peculiar and unusual that a community so fortunate as to have the natural resources for making cement could possibly object to a plant.⁸ Unwilling to invest where unwelcome, the company withdrew its proposal in early April.⁹

This was not the first time a cement plant had been planned for Santa Cruz. The first, in the middle 1870s, was not only planned, but actually constructed.¹⁰ It is a rather odd story—a case of "built but never used." The plant was located near present day Coral Street, but it never went into



Ruins of the 1870s cement plant survived into the middle 1900s. (Photo courtesy of Harold van Gorder)

commercial production. In 1900, the *Sentinel* summarized its history: “What promised twenty years ago to be an extensive cement works is now three acres of ruins. Test after test was made, covering a period of many months, and assessment after assessment was levied to pay running expenses. When the stock holders would no longer cheerfully bleed, the plant was mortgaged.”¹¹ Remains of the failed plant survived for several more decades.

Railroads

Santa Cruz’s history of unfulfilled plans goes back even before the cement plant of the 1870s. The late Rick Hamman, in his book, *California Central Coast Railways*, chronicled the frustrating case of a railroad line proposed for the San Lorenzo Valley. The “San Lorenzo Valley Railroad” was incorporated in 1861, but no serious action was taken until 1866 after the Civil War.¹² The primary purpose was to provide better transportation of timber products to the wharves in Santa Cruz. Even at this early time, there was also talk of tunneling through the mountains—a feat later achieved in a different location by the South Pacific Coast Railroad in 1880.¹³

A survey was made to determine the best route up the valley, and some excavating done, but the project quickly ran afoul of the Davis and Cowell lime company. The railroad had to pass through their land, and they demanded compensation for trees cut on their property. The fact that the railroad would benefit competing lime companies near Felton was undoubtedly also a factor. Work stalled while the case crawled through the courts. By the time the State Supreme Court ruled in favor of Davis and Cowell in 1874, the railroad was broke.¹⁴

Two years later a new company, the Santa Cruz and Felton Railroad, taking a slightly different route, succeeded where the earlier attempt had failed. However, it only extended to Felton. Initially, a flume was used to carry cut lumber from farther up the valley.¹⁵

In the 1870s, there was also discussion of building a railroad along the coastline between San Francisco and Santa Cruz.¹⁶ Talk resumed in the 1880s when the San Francisco and Ocean Shore Railroad Company formed, but it never got beyond the stock certificate stage.¹⁷

In 1905, a new company, the Ocean Shore Railway, finally began work on a coastal route. “Reaches the Beaches,” was its slogan. The Ocean Shore is best known today precisely because it

failed. Although its majestic route along the shoreline was partly built and in operation, there remained a gap between Tunitas Creek and Swanton. Less well known is that there were also plans to extend the route through Santa Cruz to Soquel and Watsonville. One map even shows it eventually extending to Fresno by way of the San Juan Pacific Railway and the proposed San Joaquin Valley Western Railway.¹⁸ Capitola developers hoped the Ocean Shore might also send a spur track their way to deliver passengers to the new “Capitola Heights” subdivision, which was being marketed to San Franciscans for summer homes.¹⁹

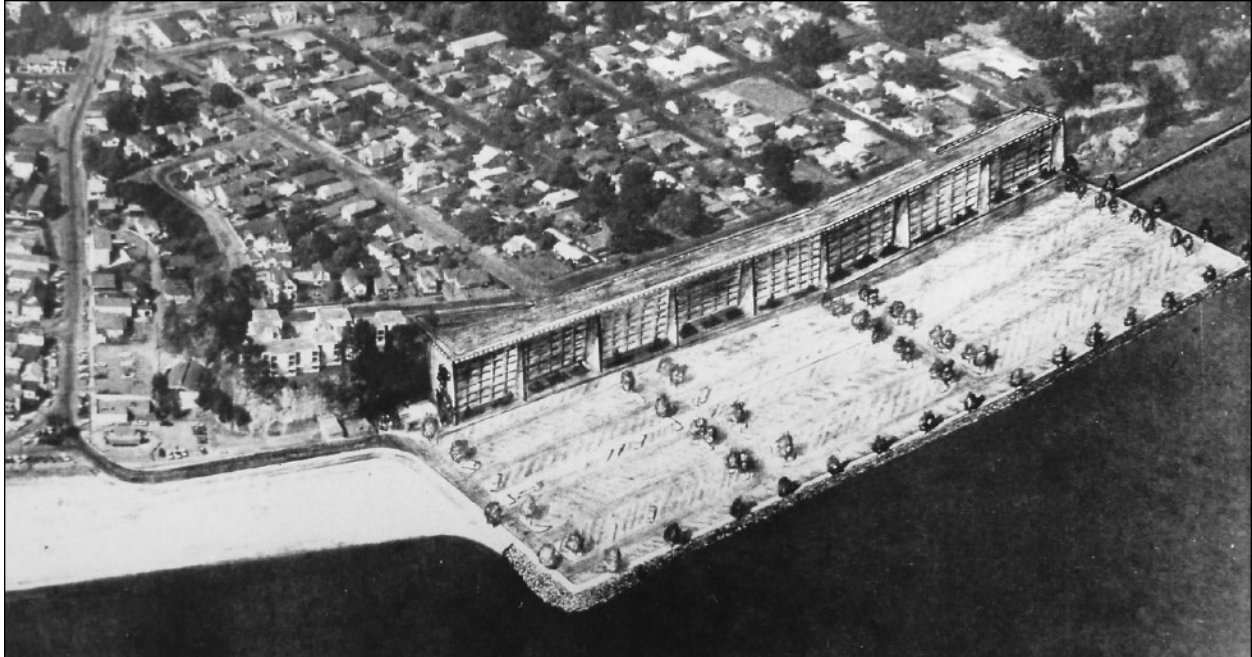
Harbor Dreams

Another unrealized project dating back to the 1860s was the Santa Cruz breakwater. The author wrote in more detail on this subject in *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 2.²⁰

Santa Cruz’s natural harbor—the anchorage off the main beach—is fine during the summer, but offers little protection from storm waves, especially in the fall and winter. A breakwater extending from the Lighthouse Point area into the bay would create a much better harbor, something like that at Long Beach. There were no railroads yet, so an improved harbor would greatly facilitate Santa Cruz area commerce.

Mention of a breakwater dates back to at least 1862: “When the new breakwater and lighthouse are completed, we hope no more benighted people will inquire—‘where is Santa Cruz?’”²¹ Four years later, when Congress passed funding for a lighthouse in Santa Cruz, it was suggested “that a breakwater and some defensive works” also be erected.²² Hopes for such a harbor improvement proved to be overly optimistic. The breakwater idea surfaced every few years on into the next century, but never quite leaped from the drawing board into the bay. Such a massive undertaking needed federal funding, but the government studies always came to a similar conclusion, something along the lines of “premature” or “not warranted at this time.” It was the classic catch-22: Santa Cruzans wanted a breakwater to bring increased commerce, but the federal government would not provide funding without the need created by increased local shipping.

In the late 1800s and very early 1900s, the emphasis was on attracting cargo ships, but big seaports demand warehouses and other supporting structures on land. By the early 1900s, Santa Cruz had inadequate space for such facilities without demolishing part of the town.



Artist's conception of the parking lot to be built on part of Monterey Bay in Capitola, 1965. (Courtesy Covello & Covello Photography and the Capitola Historical Museum)

One of the more imaginative breakwater-related proposals came in 1935. In July of that year, nine members of the Naval Affairs and Appropriations Committee of the House of Representatives visited Santa Cruz and listened to a pitch from Herbert W. Crozier, consulting engineer for the city.²³ The main thrust of Crozier's presentation was the suitability of Santa Cruz as a submarine base. Crozier described the town's sandstone cliffs as of special advantage, due to the possibility of "tunneling in from the bay for storage or communications purposes, safe from air raiders." He also discussed the possibility of the submarines themselves using the tunnels. The water was deep enough so that the subs could come and go while submerged. The entrance to the base could "in no manner be blocked," he declared. Should the Navy need a bigger base, additional facilities could be built off Capitola. At Santa Cruz, all that was needed was a 3,500-foot breakwater—already proposed—at a cost of \$1,500,000.

Finally, in the early 1960s, after a century of lobbying for a better port, Santa Cruzans settled for a small craft harbor dredged from the Woods Lagoon.

Santa Cruz was not the only town with harbor hopes. A 1910 study by the Army Corps of Engineers also investigated the feasibility of breakwaters at Monterey, Moss Landing, Port Watsonville, and Capitola. It concluded that the

present situation did not warrant such costly improvements. "While it is certain that the construction of a harbor would lead to development, . . . it is not thought that at this time the prospective commerce of the near future is sufficiently assured to warrant this large expenditure."²⁴

Capitola Breakwaters

In the middle 1960s, after the small craft harbor was built in Santa Cruz, Capitola entertained the idea of a breakwater or similar structure to counteract the adverse impact of the harbor jetties. The jetties had diverted sand from the beach at Capitola, causing summer tourism to plummet and sending Capitola into an economic death spiral. "Capitola Faces An Uncertain Future," said a headline in the *San Jose Mercury-News*.²⁵

Capitola had to get its beach back. One idea, set forth in 1965, was to claim a rectangular chunk of Monterey Bay below Depot Hill for a parking lot, hotel, and concessions. A breakwater would be built 370 feet out into the bay from near the end of the Esplanade. It would then run parallel to the Depot Hill cliffs for 1,440 feet before returning landward (later modified to 340 feet by 1,522 feet).²⁶ Backfilled, it would create parking for 1,000 cars, though some of the area might be used as a campground. Six- to seven-story buildings—housing hotels or motels, restaurants, and

concessions—would be built along the cliff face to a height at least even with Grand Avenue. An exit road along the cliffs to New Brighton Beach would also be constructed. The estimated cost was \$1,228,000.²⁷

Project backers claimed multiple benefits: trap sand to bring back Capitola's beach, solve the parking problem, solve the cliff erosion problem, and provide additional accommodations and attractions for visitors.

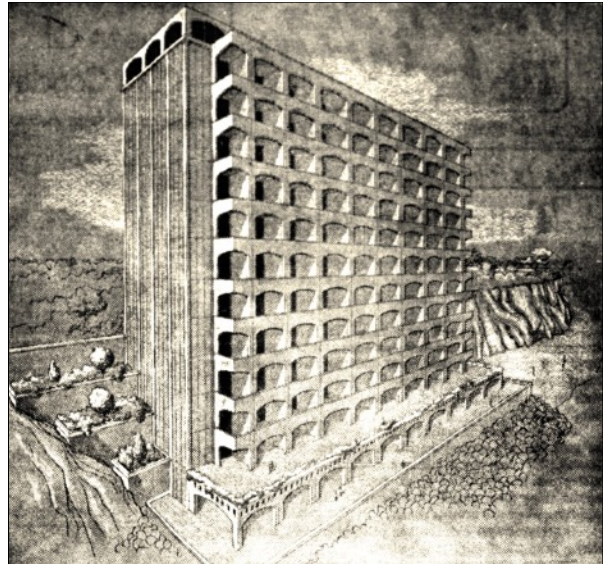
The following year, 1966, interest shifted instead to building a Capitola small craft harbor. It was not a new idea, but the loss of Capitola's beach and a heated city council campaign prompted its revival. A breakwater would be built from Opal Cliffs out into the bay 1,000 to 1,200 feet then curve around toward Depot Hill, creating a protected harbor for up to 700 boats. The breakwater would be wide enough to also serve as a parking lot for 800 cars. "The Army Corps of Engineers was quite relieved that we are working on a harbor rather than the off-shore parking facility," said Royce Kaufmann, chair of the Capitola Planning Commission. "They felt the off-shore parking facility was unfounded."²⁸ Capitola planned to seek private funding or bond money, but the plan was eventually shelved.

Capitola High-rise

The year 1966 was an interesting one for Capitola, as the town struggled to "find itself" (as they liked to say in the '60s). Apartment complexes and mobile home parks were springing up while the main business district was shifting from Capitola Village to 41st Avenue. In January, Carl Swenson of San Jose proposed a thirteen-story apartment complex for the beach and cliff at the western edge of town.²⁹ Variances for setbacks, density, and height were approved by the planning commission and city council. The property had been zoned for a four-story height limit. Had it been built, it would to this day be the tallest residential building in Santa Cruz County. In March a group of neighbors filed a lawsuit against the city for "abuse of discretion" and several other improprieties.³⁰ In April the developer, who had hoped to start construction that Spring, withdrew the proposal and asked the city to withdraw the variances, thereby nullifying the lawsuit.³¹

Towns and Subdivisions

Camp Capitola (as it was first called) was founded in 1874 and was one of the early resorts and subdivisions to court summer visitors. Its success soon prompted copycats. There was Camp



This artist's conception of a 13-story high-rise apartment building proposed for Capitola appeared in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, January 19, 1966.

Alhambra (now part of Santa Cruz's Seabright neighborhood) and Camp Fairview (on the marine terrace west of the present Capitola Village). The Camp Fairview subdivision was laid out by Dennis Carlton Feeley in 1886 and was marketed as "the most charming of Pacific Coast resorts."³² Buy the early 1890s, the F. A. Hihn Company was advertising it as Fairview Park.³³ While this area eventually filled in many decades later, it is fair to say that Fairview was a failure. It is presently the greater Jewel Box neighborhood, but the current street layout and street names are entirely different from the 1889 map of Fairview Park.³⁴

Another failed development was the town of Folger. It was to be located near the mouth of Scott Creek and was one of several towns planned along the route of the Ocean Shore Railway. Named for Ocean Shore Railway vice president James A. Folger (also known as the "Coffee King"), the development was also to have a 35-acre lake (by damming Scott Creek) for bathing, boating, and fishing. "Folger, which is to be laid out into lots as soon as sidewalks, water, and sewers are provided, promises to be one of the most popular resorts on the Coastside."³⁵ Train service to a station at the townsite began in January of 1908,³⁶ around the same time the Shore Line Investment Company filed a map with the county delineating the street layout.³⁷ Alas, Folger never had more than a few residences, and the name fell out of use within a few years.³⁸



The caption on this promotional postcard says, “I mail you this card, as an Announcement, informing you that I am about to put the SWANTON BEACH TRACT PROPERTY on the market. Am cutting it into good size Building Lots for Homes. This property is on the Cliff Drive, overlooking the beautiful Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay. The Swanton Beach is but a short walk from the Santa Cruz Beach and beautiful Casino.” The card was mailed October 10, 1908, to a prospective buyer in Sacramento. (Collection of the author)

Another subdivision planned that same year was Swanton Beach Park, laid out by Santa Cruz promoter Fred Swanton.³⁹ It was to occupy what is now the west side of Santa Cruz between Woodrow Avenue and Natural Bridges State Beach (formerly known as Swanton Beach). Swanton’s development was, to put it kindly, premature. In 1924, Swanton reported that there was evidence of oil beneath Swanton Beach Park, and recruited investors to fund drilling a well.⁴⁰ That venture also failed.

In the early 1940s, the City of Santa Cruz proposed building a municipal airport on the site. The plans called for two runways, one of 5,000 feet and one of 3,000 feet, located in the area mostly south of Delaware Avenue between Natural Bridges and Almar Avenue.⁴¹ Proponents noted that of the cities in California with a population of 10,000 or more, Santa Cruz was one of only two without a municipal airport. Santa Cruz sort of had an airport, at least it was called the Santa Cruz Airport, but was at Capitola and on land that was leased. city voters failed to approve an airport bond measure in November 1940, and again in May 1941, and the project never took off.⁴²

It took many decades for that part of Santa Cruz to fill in. Although Swanton never saw very many houses built in his subdivision, some of the layout and street names survived to the present, such as Chico, Stockton, and Modesto. Swanton had copied Capitola’s naming scheme to attract Central Valley investors.

In 1929, Capitola was not yet an incorporated city, and some people suggested that the towns of Soquel and Capitola merge and incorporate. They even had a name for the new city: Sotola—a clever


uniting of the town names. Incorporation would give residents more control, but could also mean higher taxes. A committee of local citizens formed, officers were chosen, and a meeting held at St. Joseph’s Hall in Capitola on September 11, 1929.⁴³ Plans called for the city to be bounded on the west by Rodeo Gulch, on the north by a line about one-half mile above Soquel, on the east by Porter Gulch, and on the south by Monterey Bay. Much to the disappointment of the organizers, two-thirds of those in attendance voted against the proposal.⁴⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, the incorporated City of Capitola had its eye on the same east and west boundaries, but it never expanded that far. In 2016, however, “Sotola” was rescued from the dustbin of history and adopted as the name for a restaurant in Capitola Village.

Dams

The post-World War II baby boom of the 1950s and 1960s sparked a building boom in Santa Cruz County. A remarkable number of major public projects were completed in the 1960s, included fourteen elementary schools, four middle schools, two high schools, Cabrillo College, UCSC, the Small Craft Harbor, the Central and Branciforte libraries, the County Governmental Center, and Loch Lomond Reservoir. A few projects from this era, however, never left the drawing board.

One such project was the Soquel Creek Dam. In 1961, the Soquel Creek County Water District (later “County” was dropped from the name) formed for the purpose of flood control and providing a water supply for future growth. Soquel had been devastated by the flood of 1955, and in 1958 the

PEOPLE OF SOQUEL, CAPITOLA AND THE REST OF THE COUNTY, AWAKE!



THE BUILDING OF THE SOQUEL DAM COULD MEAN YOUR LIFE AND THE LIVES OF YOUR FAMILIES. THIS DAM WILL BE 50 TIMES LARGER THAN THE DAM THAT BROKE IN THE LOS ANGELES AREA.

- ★ Quote from page 4 of Army Report: "Due to the occupancy of the San Andreas and its distributive faults within the basin, this area has been classed as seismically active."
- ★ Quote from Page 35 of the Army Report: "The federal government would perform construction of all improvements and purchase all lands, easements, and rights-of-way and relocations required for construction of Soquel Dam and Reservoir and would operate and maintain the project. Local interests would bear the joint-use annual charges allocated to water conservation and a portion of the annual charges allocated to recreation, including maintenance, operation and major replacement, and would be responsible for regulation of the water supply." Do we, the people of Santa Cruz County, have anything to say?
- ★ The charges to us on this dam are to be \$402,000.00 annually. The approximate annual taxes lost will be \$75,000.00. Pipe lines and treatment plant will cost how much? It seems a high price to pay for 12,500 acre feet annually of drinking water.
- ★ The Army Corps of Engineers says San Francisco needs a recreation lake, they will not use their nearby Chrystal Springs lake because they use it for drinking water, but it seems to be all right to use our water for recreation.
- ★ We were publicly promised by the Army an expert to answer our questions. When we asked for the expert, the Army would not produce one. Were they afraid to answer our questions?
- ★ Why did the county board of supervisors approve the plan on October 14, 1963 and hold a public meeting on October 17, 1963.

A massive crack extends across the bottom of the Baldwin Hills reservoir in Los Angeles, leading to the spot where the wall gave way sending tons of water rushing down the street.

Part of the January 9, 1964, newspaper ad in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* opposing the Soquel Creek Dam.

Federal Government authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to survey the area for flood control purposes.⁴⁵ In 1961 the District formed to work with the Army engineers and seek local support and some local funding. In September 1963, the Army unveiled plans for a 260-foot-high earthen dam on Soquel Creek just above the intersection of Soquel-San Jose Road and Laurel Glen Road. The resulting lake would cover 1,000 acres and impound 70,800 acre-feet of water.⁴⁶ The dam would control flooding, provide a reliable source of domestic water, and provide boating and other recreational opportunities. The federal government would pay 60 percent of the \$28 million cost, while the remainder would be funded locally through various fees.⁴⁷

Opposition to the plan sprang up immediately. Those living above Soquel did not want to lose their homes and farms. Detractors also complained that the recreational aspects would favor people from outside the area. Of special concern was the seismic risk. The reservoir would be directly over the Zayante Fault (one of the county's four major fault zones) and only a few miles south of the San Andreas Fault.

Those concerned about the seismic risk received a big but tragic boost to their argument only three months after the proposal by the Army Corps. On December 14, 1963, the Baldwin Hills Dam in Los

Angeles failed, killing five people, and causing \$15 million in damages.⁴⁸

The Baldwin Hills Dam was only 12 years old, but had been constructed over an area known for active subsidence and cut by two active faults. An investigation revealed that the failure was due to rupture of the reservoir lining by subsidence along one of the faults.⁴⁹ There were certainly similarities to the geologic setting in Soquel.

A January 1964 newspaper advertisement urged citizens to take action. "The building of the Soquel dam could mean your life and the lives of your families. This dam will be 50 times larger than the dam that broke in the Los Angeles area," warned the Association for the Preservation of Soquel Valley.⁵⁰ One of the more interesting arguments against the dam came from area resident Henry Hyman, who cited reports that atomic powered desalination could make dams obsolete "probably within a few years."⁵¹ James Singer, secretary of the water district, favored the project and considered the dam perhaps the most important county issue of 1964.⁵²

Debate over the dam continued for two more years. The County Board of Supervisors urged the Army Corps of Engineers to consider two small dams instead, one on each principal branch of the creek.⁵³ Although these dams would not flood prime land as would the big one, the corps considered such a plan much less efficient. In April 1966, the Supervisors asked the corps to abandon its proposal for a single large dam, and in August the the corps complied.⁵⁴

In the decades following World War II, a number of other dams were considered for Santa Cruz County to meet the anticipated growth in population. These included dams on Scott Creek, Laguna Creek, Newell Creek, Bear Creek, Boulder Creek, Zayante Creek, Rodeo Gulch, the Pajaro River, and the previously mentioned two branches of Soquel Creek.

Of these, the Zayante Creek dam received the most attention, yet was never built. Debated for nearly four decades, the project was shelved indefinitely in 1987 when it was deleted from the general plan approved by the Santa Cruz City Council.⁵⁵ The reasons included its high price tag, nearness to the Zayante Fault, and restrictive environmental regulations.⁵⁶ Of the many county dam proposals during the second half of the twentieth century, only the Newell Creek dam (completed in 1960) and an inflatable diversion dam on the San Lorenzo River (1975) came to fruition.

In subsequent decades, attention has instead focused on water conservation.

Freeways

Another highly contentious project proposed in the 1960s was the bypass of Santa Cruz by Highway 1.

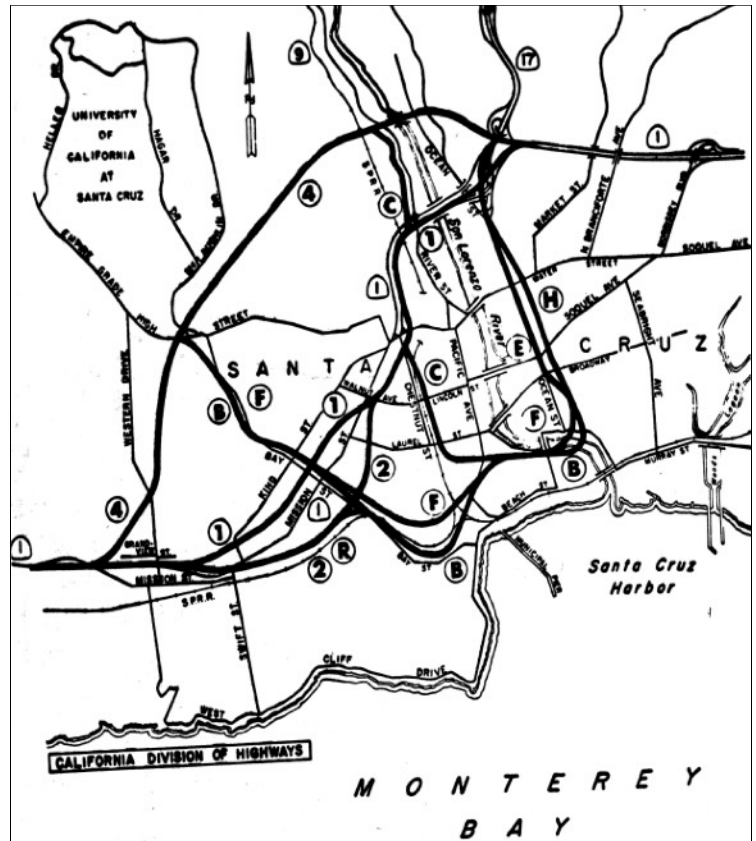
The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the construction of the freeway through the mid-county area and an expressway from the Highway 17/Ocean Street merger to Mission Street. The state legislature, however, as part of its grand plan of California freeways, called for Santa Cruz to be entirely bypassed. On June 13, 1967, as the freeway bypass of Watsonville neared completion, the State Division of Highways presented several alternative plans for Santa Cruz.⁵⁷

Santa Cruz's complicated geography and growing urbanization made bypassing more challenging than Watsonville. Routes "1," "2," and "4" were the primary ones presented for consideration. Routes 1 and 2 already had been adopted as potential freeway corridors in the City General Plan of 1964. Route 1 cut through the west side north of Mission Street while Route 2 was south of Mission Street. Route 4, known as the northern route, passed through Pogonip, the southern edge of the UCSC campus, and the Westlake District.

In addition, state officials also proposed a "beach loop." This would be either an expressway or freeway that would continue from Highway 17 parallel to Ocean Street down to the beach area—where it would either cut over to Chestnut Street and proceed north to Highway 1 or cut over to Bay Street and join Highway 1 at one of the three proposed freeway routes.⁵⁸

Eventually, it came down to a choice between Route 2 and Route 4, pitting UCSC and residents of the Westlake area against those of the Mission Street corridor. It was said that the latter would displace 380 families, while Route 4 would only displace 81. Route 4 was also less expensive to build. However, the steep grades of Route 4 could mean increased truck noise. The planning commission favored Route 2.

In a letter to the editor of the *Sentinel*, historic preservationist Doni Tunheim (who lived on Green Street) wanted to know why her city government was endorsing a "river of cement" through the heart of Santa Cruz. Does the planning commission "really suppose that a 500-foot-wide interchange by the Upper Plaza is an enhancement to our community?"⁵⁹



In 1967 several alternate freeway routes (numbered 1, 2 and 4) were proposed to bypass Santa Cruz. This map also shows possible routes (designated by letters) for a "beach loop" expressway that would direct traffic through the beach area. (California Division of Highways map, as reproduced in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 15, 1967, p. 6)

In August 1968, 1,000 people packed the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium for a six-hour-long public hearing. Not surprisingly, a majority favored Route 4, many of them people who would lose their homes under Route 2.⁶⁰ In January of 1970, the State Highway Commission adopted Route 4 but said the \$39 million project would not start until 1978 at the earliest.⁶¹ By the early 1970s, some people were beginning to think that the best alternative was no freeway at all. Alas, that is exactly what happened. In 1975, the controversial project was scrapped by the state due to cutbacks in highway funds.⁶² The State Highway Commission urged that land already purchased for Route 4 be sold.

Nuclear Power Plant

The 1970s witnessed even more controversies than the 1960s. In just the first few months of 1970 rumors began to circulate that the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) was eyeing Santa Cruz

County for a nuclear power plant. By the middle of April, these were no longer just rumors. The utility company announced it was taking out a purchase option on 6,800 acres belonging to the Coast Dairies and Land Company near Davenport.⁶³ On April 21, the company made its first public presentation about the plant. Ironically, it was the day before the first Earth Day.

The power company emphasized that everything was very preliminary. Many studies needed to be done, including geological, seismological, biological, archaeological, and economic. Most of the power would be for the San Jose area. Environmentalists immediately expressed grave concerns about such a project. Conservationists wanted to keep the “North Coast” pristine.

The history of nuclear power plants in California began in 1957 with construction of the small, Vallecitos plant in Alameda County.⁶⁴ It was a joint project of PG&E and General Electric. California power companies planned more plants during the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, only five were built, and only one (Diablo Canyon) remains in operation at the time of this writing.⁶⁵

Opponents had many concerns, including release of radiation, accidents, earthquakes, thermal pollution of the sea, and how to dispose of radioactive waste. Critics of the Davenport proposal were justifiably concerned, given the Bodega Head case in Sonoma County a few years earlier. In the early 1960s, PG&E excavated Bodega Head for the reactor and even installed forms for the concrete before a geologist discovered an active fault running through the site.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, citizens had been told to “leave it to the experts.”⁶⁷ The utility company abandoned the project in 1964 after opposition spread to high levels in the state and federal government.⁶⁸

By the time of the Davenport proposal, PG&E’s approach had dramatically changed. “We sincerely hope that the residents, elected officials and staff of Santa Cruz County will assist us in the study process in order that all interested parties may come to a conclusion as to whether or not the county’s best interests would be served by establishing a power plant in this region . . .” said Kenneth J. Diercks of PG&E.⁶⁹ To educate the public more about nuclear power, PG&E financed a special on local television and parked a traveling exhibit van at locations around Santa Cruz County, including at schools.⁷⁰

The controversy raged for several years until April 1975, when PG&E announced that it was

dropping its option to buy the property. It cited new state regulations and uncertainty whether it could get a Coastal Commission permit among the factors for its decision.⁷¹ Independent geologic studies eventually identified faults of the San Gregorio Fault Zone passing very near the proposed plant site.⁷² In 2017, the Coast Dairies property became Cotoni-Coast Diaries National Monument.

Wilder Ranch

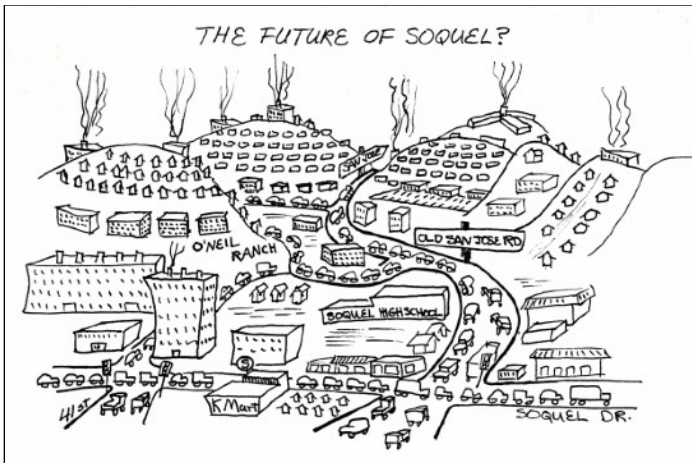
Two major residential developments proposed during the 1970s also ended up becoming parks. In 1972 developers proposed a community of 33,000 on the old Wilder Ranch just up the coast from Santa Cruz. Called Wilder Ranch and Beaches, the project was to be built over 40 years and completed in 2012.⁷³ The proposal was met with widespread opposition. Only two years later the state purchased the land, and it is now Wilder Ranch State Park.

O’Neill Ranch

In contrast to Wilder Ranch, the saga of the O’Neill Ranch in Soquel played out over thirty years.⁷⁴ In 1971, an investment company, Ohio Equities, proposed a development of 692 to 867 residential units on approximately 100 acres just north of Soquel High School.⁷⁵ It was to be called “Villas de Soquel.” At that time, the Soquel area had fewer than 5,000 people, and many worried that such a high-density development would change the rural character of the region. A group opposing the plan formed in 1972 and a year later became known as the “Save Soquel” committee.

The initial proposal was eventually dropped, but in 1979, a different developer proposed a 537-unit housing project for the site.⁷⁶ Later that year the number of units was stated to be 490, with part of the property set aside for a school and park.⁷⁷ An environmental impact report, however, concluded that such a massive project would result in greatly increased demands on area resources such as highways, schools, and water.⁷⁸ In 1980, the Board of Supervisors nevertheless approved a plan for up to 468 units, prompting lawsuits to stop the development.⁷⁹ In 1984, the County Planning Commission revoked the plan.⁸⁰

In 1987, yet another plan was put forth, this one for 258 units. Later this was increased to 318.⁸¹ In 1988, the developer offered to sell the site for a park, and in December of that year the County Board of Supervisors struck a deal to purchase the land.⁸² Initially, there were still to be 100 housing units, but in 1992 this was cut to 66.⁸³ A



This early 1970s cartoon depicts what Soquel might have looked like if the O'Neill Ranch development was approved. (Save Soquel Archives, Capitola Historical Museum)

controversial proposal to loop 41st Avenue through the site was also abandoned at this time. Finally, in 1995 the supervisors voted to remove all housing units from the plan and make it entirely a park.⁸⁴

The park planning process then began, and on May 5, 2001, Anna Jean Cummings Park was dedicated. Mrs. Cummings had been a driving force for Save Soquel from the beginning until her untimely death in 1990.⁸⁵ In 2001, Katherine Sweet, a Save Soquel member, reflected on the group's accomplishment: "Save Soquel set out to do something a long time ago. Thirty years of diligence and determination finally resulted in a special place for all to enjoy. Occasionally, when you're in the park, pause and consider that it exists because people cared enough to make it happen."⁸⁶

Wingspread

In 1972, while the O'Neill Ranch controversy was heating up in Soquel, descendants of Soquel's pioneer Porter family donated part of their old family ranch to UCSC.⁸⁷ The 66-acre grassy field bordered the coastline between New Brighton and Seacliff Beaches. The University planned to sell or lease the property to raise funds. State Parks expressed interest in the property and even started budgeting for its purchase. In 1978, however, the UC Regents decided to lease the land to Conference Associates of Palo Alto, headed by Ryland Kelly of the firm Hare, Brewer, and Kelly.⁸⁸ The same group had been responsible for the Pajaro Dunes development in the early 1970s.

In 1980, the developer unveiled its plans: a 630-unit "arts and vacation residential center" to be called Wingspread Beach.⁸⁹ The units were in the form of condominiums, a hotel/lodge, courtyard homes, apartments, and a hotel/conference center. There would also be two performance halls, two small theaters, restaurants, shops, and galleries.⁹⁰

The overall public reception was lukewarm at best. Only a year later the developer sued the county over delays.⁹¹ In the meantime, State Parks continued to express interest in adding the parcel to New Brighton State Beach with money from a 1980 State Parks bond act. The developer, however, was not interested in parting with the property "at any price."⁹²

In 1986, the Board of Supervisors, in a 3-2 vote, approved in concept a scaled down Wingspread with many conditions, such as construction of direct freeway access.⁹³ In 1987, the supervisors



Anti-Wingspread campaign sign, 1988. (Capitola Historical Museum collection)

gave all but final approval. Opponents, however, threatened to put a binding referendum on the ballot. In a pre-emptive move, the Supervisors decided to put it on the ballot themselves as an advisory vote.⁹⁴ In June, 1988, voters rejected the project by a near 2-1 margin.⁹⁵ The developer vowed to come forth with alternative plans, but ran into financial trouble. In 1993, the land was finally acquired by State Parks.

Although the above high-profile projects were derailed, the 1970s and 1980s were, in reality, periods of tremendous residential growth. In the 1970s, the county population grew by 67,259 people, and an estimated 24,000 homes were built.⁹⁶ In the 1980s, the population grew by another 41,593.⁹⁷ This growth was especially apparent in the mid-county region where vacant lots, once plentiful, all but disappeared.

Loma Prieta National Forest

Not every failed venture involved construction. Ever hear of Loma Prieta National Forest? If not, it is probably because it never came to be. The idea was promoted way back in 1936 by members of the Santa Cruz Rod and Gun Club at the urging of Harold Nelson of the Santa Cruz Farm Bureau.⁹⁸ The goal was to set aside 80,000 acres surrounding Loma Prieta in both Santa Clara and Santa Cruz Counties to protect the watersheds and “virgin” timber. The plan, however, was promptly rejected by the US Forest Service for lack of funds.⁹⁹

Undaunted, backers began lobbying for a state forest instead. In 1940, the governor signed a bill making way for creation of such a forest.¹⁰⁰ By 1946, the possibility of a Loma Prieta State Forest was “nearer than it ever had been before.”¹⁰¹ But in 1947, the State Forestry Board decided not to purchase land for the forest, saying it did not meet the necessary criteria.¹⁰² In some sense, Loma Prieta State Forest eventually became reality, but on a much smaller scale and under a different name. In 1988, the state acquired 2,681 acres in the upper reaches of the Soquel Creek watershed, south of Loma Prieta, for the Soquel Demonstration State Forest.¹⁰³ It is one of eight state demonstration forests in California, totaling 71,000 acres.¹⁰⁴

UCSC

Many projects begin with conceptual drawings. Designers express the general concept of the project first and, if approved, begin working on the actual design. Often the conceptual drawings are very different from the final version. A good example is UCSC.

In 1960, at the urging of the UC Regents, the City of Santa Cruz and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors submitted a prospectus for a University of California campus on the Cowell Ranch in Santa Cruz.¹⁰⁵ Titled, *A University of California Campus at Santa Cruz*, the slick, spiral-bound book was written specifically for the UC Regents and included a development plan for the campus and a land-use plan for the surrounding area.¹⁰⁶

This early version of the campus shows it spread over six isolated parcels: three in Pogonip, one (the “campus core”) on what is now the lower campus, one on what is now the upper campus, and one off of Smith Grade. All are surrounded by future urban areas and highways, including an eastern access connecting the campus core to Highway 17. The campus core is shown where the Farm and Arboretum are today.

Many of the early plans show a football stadium. A stadium even shows up on a circa 1969 road map as “proposed.”¹⁰⁷ Its map location suggests it was to be sunk into the lower quarry beside Hagar Drive. No such stadium was ever built, of course, and to this day UCSC has no football team.

Conclusions

The alternatives to history in the small but diverse sample presented here failed for three reasons: lack of funding, political opposition, or impracticality. Some failed because of a combination of all three. Proposals such as the Soquel Creek Dam, the Highway 1 bypass, Wingspread, and Wilder Ranch and Beaches were very doable, but fell short to a large extent because of grass-roots opposition from citizen groups. For the latter two, the developers also faced rising costs due to delays or because of conditions tacked on to the project by government agencies. Others, such as the mile-long breakwater, were, in hindsight, simply unrealistic. There was no good reason for the Federal Government to fund such a massive harbor project in Santa Cruz when the town is only 75 miles south of San Francisco Bay—one of the greatest natural harbors in the world.

In the years ahead, as new projects are proposed, it is worth taking a look back to see how people responded to proposals of the past and to the future that might have been. What kinds of trends do the proposals show and why did they fail? Historians often like to repeat the famous quote by George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” It is also

worth remembering some of those projects that did not happen, lest they be resurrected.

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About the Author

Frank Perry was born and raised in Santa Cruz and has long been fascinated in the region's natural features and cultural history. He has written several books and numerous articles on these topics. He presently serves as curator of the Capitola Historical Museum.

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