

POINT REYES LIGHT

Parking ban's impact on coastal access concerns CCC

By

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07/25/2019

The California Coastal Commission last week threw a wrench in the plans of Bolinas residents hoping to implement new overnight parking restrictions on oversized vehicles on downtown streets. In a letter to the county, commission staff argued that the proposed regulation—which passed by a 52-percent majority in an advisory poll last November and was pending implementation by the county—contradicts a tenet of the 1976 California Coastal Act: to enhance public access to the coast.

The July 15 letter directs the county to thoroughly revise the proposal, ensuring that it addresses day-time parking congestion and does not limit access to the beach. As a prompt, the C.C.C. staff made a counter proposal that includes data collection and a commitment to collaborate with county agencies focused on addressing the needs of the homeless who could be displaced by the change.

“We need to take a deep breath and step back,” said Supervisor Dennis Rodoni, who collaborated with the Bolinas Community Public Utility District to draft the proposal. “It’s an opportunity to revisit the regulation we are proposing, integrating the key takeaways from the commission’s staff and also look to see if it needs to be changed to better reflect Bolinas’s needs.”

The BCPUD plans to host a community meeting in August to gather input from residents. Staff from the department of public works expects to complete a new proposal by the end of the year.

Measure X, the advisory measure that narrowly passed last fall, directed the county to enact a resolution to “include Brighton Avenue, Park Avenue and Wharf Road in downtown Bolinas as county roads on which there shall be no overnight parking of vehicles, except for automobiles, motorcycles and pickups” between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m.

Based on Mr. Rodoni’s guidance, the language drew from an enabling county ordinance that allows municipalities to tailor parking rules to local needs. “We were trying to pass something quickly, but that didn’t work very well,” the supervisor said this week. He added that he thought creating a new ordinance not tied to the enabling ordinance but instead tailored specially to Bolinas would be best next step.

Considering feedback he has received from the community, he said it likely would not be necessary to take another advisory poll.

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Parking has been a longstanding issue in town: the BCPUD created its own downtown parking plan and gained approval from the citizenry in 2006, but the county deemed the ideas infeasible in part based on the coastal commission's anticipated response.

The downtown streets in Bolinas bear the brunt of visitor traffic. A number of longtime Bolinas residents displaced from their homes have set up camp on the same streets, which are near beach access points, public restrooms and water fountains; their vehicles often take up more than one parking spot, in some instances for months at a time. Other vehicles provide storage space for those living in tight quarters on the street.

Though some residents are more compassionate toward the people living on the streets, many seem to agree that the current scenario is chaotic and inconvenient. The process of drafting the advisory measure, which in the end barely passed, was lengthy: many people saw the issue as more nuanced and hoped for different language.

At a regular monthly meeting last Wednesday, the BCPUD's board of directors discussed their discontent with the coastal commission's resistance to their proposal. Directors said they would stand up for the residents who say congestion on downtown streets degrades their quality of life, citing another key mandate of the California Coastal Act: to protect the communities and neighborhoods "which, because of their unique characteristics, are popular visitor destination points for recreational uses."

Marin's 1980 Local Coastal Program, which both the county and the commission are currently in the process of updating, further clarifies that section: "The intent of this policy is to protect the unique character of existing coastal communities." Marin's program also specifically carves out the majority of downtown Bolinas as a designated historic area, subject to defined preservation standards.

But Bolinas residents feel the coastal commission is failing to protect their community. "[Supervisor Rodoni] went for a very simple approach, something he thought could get through the coastal commission: just regulate oversized vehicles on overnight visitors. The fact that it still got stymied is really shocking," Lyndon Comstock, a BCPUD board member, commented. "[The staff] really doesn't seem to recognize that preserving the historic character of the beach communities is part of their mandate."

Jack Siedman, the board's chair, agreed. "We have reached to the point that we need to draw our own line in the sand and be prepared to stand up to these people and push back," he said. "Maybe that means organizing people along the coast and attending coastal commission meetings. We are getting punched too many times and it's time to stand up to these people: they have really crossed the line and are being unreasonable."

Arianne Dar, the executive director of the Bolinas Community Land Trust, chimed in. "Maybe for all of the coastal zone this is how it has to be, but they aren't knowing, noticing or understanding that we are a cul-de-sac—there's limited access," she said. "Somehow these communities in West Marin need to demand that the coastal commission actually come and see

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what these issues are that they are creating. I don't think that any of us want to limit access to the coast: these large vehicles mean that no one can access it."

Yet Sara Pfeifer, the commission's North Central coast planner who penned the June 15 letter, said the parking proposal "appears to be inconsistent with provisions of the Coastal Act embedded in the [Local Coastal Program]; including that the location of new development should maintain and enhance public access to the coast by providing adequate parking facilities, consistent with Coastal Act section 30252."

The county must ultimately comply with the Coastal Act based on the commission's interpretation. Though Marin's community development agency is responsible for issuing a coastal development permit regarding the new regulations in downtown Bolinas, the coastal commission becomes the decision-maker in the case of an appeal from a citizen or one of the commissioners.

Ms. Pfeifer's letter questioned whether the county's proposed rule would even be effective, asking how it would address parking congestion during the day and whether it would simply lead people to relocate large vehicles to nearby areas.

Instead, Ms. Pfeifer offered an alternative, essentially an inverse proposal: a permitted overnight parking program for oversized vehicles. "Such a program could reduce parking demand during peak daytime hours by limiting oversized vehicle parking to the low-demand hours, such as between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.," she wrote. "Thus, it could reduce the burden on those seeking daytime access, while providing those using vehicular shelter the opportunity to take advantage where nighttime parking is available."

In a conversation with the Light this week, Ms. Pfeifer clarified that this language was not necessarily proposing that the county prohibit larger vehicles from parking during the day. Instead, she said, it left the issue of day-time parking open-ended for the county's consideration. "If the problem really is day-time parking, than we hope the county will consider alternatives that also establish a different parking structure during the day for all types of vehicles," she said. "We started here because we thought it could be good to at least give a bit more structure to permitting oversized vehicles to be there at night, giving them a safe space."

The program, Ms. Pfeifer's letter outlined, could be a collaboration between the county sheriff's office, health and human services, housing authority and the public works and planning departments. Since this kind of overnight parking program might push people to leave Bolinas, the county could consider creating a similar program in nearby areas, she said.

Ms. Pfeifer's letter urged the county's next proposal to incorporate several other recommendations.

First, it should address how the county's Housing First program would provide assistance to the individuals cited or displaced by the proposed regulations, "assuring environmental justice impacts are avoided, minimized and mitigated for consistency with the Coastal Act."

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Second, the regulation should be a one- to two-year pilot versus a permanent shift.

Third, the county should undertake intensive data collection as part of the new program. The commission's staff would want to know the number of currently uninhabited or abandoned vehicles compared to the number after the rule is implemented, and the current turnover of visitor parking during daytime hours now and after the rule goes into effect. The commission wants the county to monitor where vehicles relocate in the nearby area and to document how many displaced people are contacted through outreach.

Finally, Ms. Pfiefer urged an expansion of public transportation opportunities, which she said could help to address the limited parking availability in Bolinas.

To the Light, she said, "There is clearly a problem. We understand that, and we want to help to come up with a resolution. We also want to make sure that it is sensitive to the greater context, protecting public access and Coastal Act consistency."