

# S.F.'s Embarcadero seawall is surprise beneficiary of Trump-signed spending bill



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San Francisco's quest to rebuild its Embarcadero seawall has received a boost from the federal pandemic relief package.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

San Francisco's quest to rebuild its Embarcadero seawall has received a boost from an unexpected source — the 5,593-page bundle of federal legislation that includes \$900 billion for pandemic relief.

The boost doesn't involve stimulus payments, since any construction to strengthen the aged barrier of concrete and rocks is several years away. But new guidelines that give the city a better shot at receiving sizable federal aid for the \$3 billion-plus project were included in a bill that accompanied the stimulus package.

"We've been making the case for this for a while," said Elaine Forbes, executive director of the Port of San Francisco. "It levels the playing field."

The change in how federal regulators evaluate project proposals is contained in the 369-page Water Resources Development Act of 2020, which passed Congress

with bipartisan support. The final version then became part of the omnibus spending bill that accompanied the more controversial stimulus package that President Trump signed into law on Dec. 27.

The water act also makes it easier for Marin, San Mateo and San Francisco counties to seek federal funding to plan for sea level rise along the coast. Another piece of the omnibus bill boosts the federal money provided annually to help restore bay wetlands from \$5 million to \$9 million, an increase that Rep. Jackie Speier, D-San Mateo, has sought since 2010.

The biggest gain for San Francisco involves a provision that sounds arcane but is significant — how costs and benefits are measured by the Army Corps of Engineers.



Pier 38 along the Embarcadero in San Francisco.

The corps began working in 2019 with the Port of San Francisco on a study of flooding dangers along 7 miles of shoreline from Aquatic Park south to the Bayview neighborhood. If the corps and Congress decide that such a project has national economic benefits, Washington will pay 65% of the cost.

Until now, however, the evaluation of such a project required that the price tag of potential impacts be balanced against the full project budget. In the case of the seawall, that full budget will include upgrades that would be required no matter what to make the century-old structure strong enough to ride out a major earthquake.

The 2020 act removes this requirement, which would have put the port at a disadvantage when competing for federal funding against other projects that don't need seismic upgrades.

The provision was supported by other West Coast cities grappling with how to prepare for sea level rise in earthquake zones. In a statement touting the passage of the act, Speaker Nancy Pelosi called the change a key step “to ensure that flood risk initiatives in seismic hazard zones are not penalized” when being compared to projects in other regions.

The revision is one step in what the port’s Forbes described as a “long, long process” toward rebuilding the seawall.

The study now being done by the port and the Army Corps of Engineers won’t produce full flood control proposals before this fall. The selection of a preferred plan would be followed by environmental reviews and — if all goes well — approval by Congress in 2024.

This doesn’t mean there will be no work on the Embarcadero in the meantime.

The port released a study in the fall that described in chilling detail how a major earthquake could cause portions of the filled soil behind the seawall to liquefy, fracturing pipes and transit lines as well as historic buildings. The port aims this summer to present fixes for the seawall sections that need them the most; these fixes would be funded by a \$425 million bond that city voters approved in 2018.

Portions of the Bay Area’s Pacific shoreline, meanwhile, are now eligible for federal funding that before was off limits.

The water act makes future projects along the coast eligible for federal assistance — not only to respond to current flood dangers but also to “investigate measures to adapt to rising sea levels.”

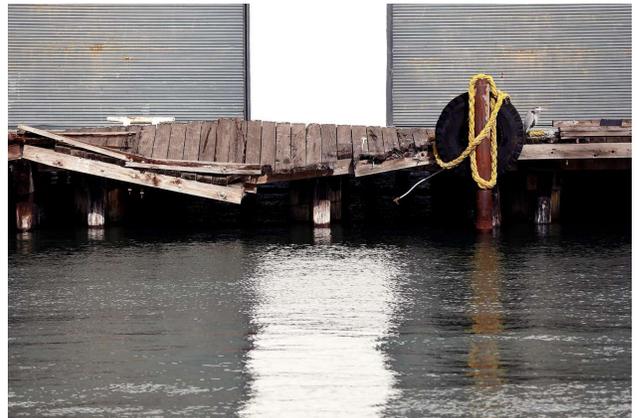
Statements of this sort suggests a less antagonistic approach to the science of climate change in coming years than the tone set by Trump and many of his top officials. Bay Area officials working to prepare for rising tides that might be decades off welcome the shift.

“The big waste the last four years was that you couldn’t talk about climate change” with federal bureaucrats wary of antagonizing officials higher up the chain of command, said Larry Goldzband, executive director of the Bay

Conservation and Development Commission. “That puts us farther behind than we would have been otherwise.”



Pier 7 along the Embarcadero in San Francisco.  
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle



Pier 38 along the Embarcadero is a beneficiary of pandemic relief.  
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle



Federal stimulus funds will benefit Pier 14 along the Embarcadero.  
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle



Pier 14 along the Embarcadero in San Francisco.  
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

*John King is The San Francisco Chronicle's urban design critic.  
Email: [jking@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jking@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@johnkingsfchron](https://twitter.com/johnkingsfchron)*