

**Section 210.4.
Coastal Headlands, Bluffs,
and Cliffs**

A. Definition

Coastal cliffs, and bluffs are elevated land forms on headlands directly abutting coastal waters, a beach, coastal wetland, and rocky shore.

B. Findings

1. Coastal cliffs and bluffs include a wide variety of headland land forms ranging from low bluffs with scarps cut in easily erodible glacial river or lake sediment, or in glacial till, to the dramatic bedrock cliffs of Newport and Narragansett. They are among our most scenic coastal features and are the sites for popular scenic overlooks. More than 300,000 visit Newport's Cliff Walk each year.

2. Exposed bluffs of unconsolidated material, such as those along the Matunuck headland in South Kingstown, have been known to recede by as much as 30 feet in a single severe hurricane. Portions of the Mohegan Bluffs on Block Island have eroded similar distances by undercutting of the toe resulting in bluff collapse in less severe storms. Human activities can greatly increase the susceptibility of headland bluffs to erosion. Structures close to the face of a bluff can make the feature unstable, and concentrated runoff and devegetation can cause a marked acceleration of erosion. Factors that affect the ability of a cliff or bluff to withstand erosion include its composition (rock or soil type), slope, stratigraphy, height, exposure, vegetative cover, and the amount of human disturbance to which it is subjected. Since headland bluffs are composed of unconsolidated glacial sediment, they are more susceptible to erosion than headland cliffs composed of bedrock.

3. Eroding bluffs can be important sources of sediment to nearby beaches. The bluffs of Watch Hill headland in Westerly, for example, were probably an important source of sand to the South Shore barrier and headland beaches. Extensive revegeting of this headland certainly had a detrimental effect on these apparently distant and unconnected beaches. Due largely to their inaccessibility to man and other predators, some cliffs and bluffs provide important nesting sites for several species of birds.

C. Policies

1. The Council's goals are to (a) protect coastal cliffs, and bluffs from activities and alterations that may damage the value of these features as sources of sediment to beaches and as a buffer against storm waves and flooding; (b) prevent any construction in contiguous areas that may weaken the feature and has the potential of creating a hazard; and (c) preserve the scenic and ecological values of these features.

2. Due to their well-recognized scenic value and their use as tourist attractions and low-intensity recreation areas, the Council designates the following coastal cliffs and bluffs as Coastal Natural Areas: Bonnet Point, Hazard Rocks, Fort Wetherill, Ocean Drive, the Brenton Cove Cliffs, Cliff Walk, Purgatory Chasm, Sakonnet Point, and Mohegan Bluffs. A Council priority when considering proposed alterations on or adjacent to these features is the preservation and, where possible, the restoration of their scenic qualities.

3. On shorelines adjacent to Type 1 waters, the Council shall prohibit construction on or alteration of coastal cliffs and bluffs and contiguous areas where such construction or alteration has a reasonable probability of causing or accelerating erosion or degrading a generally recognized scenic vista. The Council shall require suitable unaltered buffer zones on cliffs and bluffs where erosion or substrate stability can be affected by facility construction or use.

In determining whether a reasonable probability exists that increased erosion or loss of scenic values will result from the proposed construction or alteration, the Council shall consider the following:

- (a) the exposure of the feature to the erosional forces of tidal currents, storm waves and storm-surge flooding, wind and surface runoff, and other such natural processes;
- (b) the composition of the feature involved as well as its slope, stratigraphy, height, exposure, and vegetative cover;
- (c) existing types and levels of use and alteration;
- (d) competent geological evidence to evaluate whether natural erosion of the feature in question is a significant source of sediments to nearby

headland and barrier beaches and whether the proposed construction of alteration will substantially reduce that source of sediment; and

(e) inclusion of the feature on an accepted inventory of significant scenic or natural areas or evidence of public use and enjoyment as a scenic or natural area.

4. The Council shall encourage the use of non-structural methods to diminish frontal erosion associated with coastal cliffs and bluffs adjacent to Type 1 and Type 2 waters.

5. Construction or alterations to coastal cliff and bluffs contiguous to Type 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 waters may be permitted if (a) the construction is undertaken to accommodate a designated priority use for the abutting water area, (b) the applicant has examined all reasonable alternatives and the Council has determined that the selected alternative is the most reasonable, and (c) only the minimum alteration necessary to support the designated priority use is made. In considering applications for permits for erosion-control measures, the Council shall weigh the impact of the proposed structure on the supply of sediments to nearby beaches. Where the Council finds that a substantial reduction or elimination of sediment is likely to result, and that natural erosional processes affecting the nearby beach will thereby be accelerated, it shall deny an application for Assent.