

## Hidden skate park faces perils of popularity

County warns unsanctioned park must close

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The so-called Moss Beach Ruins are owned by a school employees union in San Jose. San Mateo County officials are mulling how to deal with the impromptu skate park.  
Dean Coppola

When it comes to skateboarding on the coast, the Kelly Avenue park would probably qualify as the safest, while the Surfer's Beach half-pipe can claim the best view. But which is the absolute best skate park around, bar none?

If you ask someone in the know, you might be directed to an eerie vacant property in the eastern foothills of Moss Beach. Hidden amid the trees and rubble on that site is the Coastside's most elaborate skate park, an obstacle course carved out of concrete and covered in graffiti and scuff marks.

The skate park, known as the "Moss Beach Ruins" or the "Moss Beach DIY," has no directions or maps posted online. Instead, the park remained a loose secret between skateboarders and an anonymous group of designers who spent years and a lot of money discreetly building it.

"It's a gem, not just of the coast, but of the whole Bay Area," said Tim West, an El Granada resident who helped build the Burnham Strip ramp to the south. "It's built professionally. It's a real-deal park."

But the secret is getting harder to keep as more visitors have been flocking onto the private property where the skate course is located. In recent days, Moss Beach neighbors have raised concerns that the unregulated property was also contributing to petty crimes in the area.

In a blog posting earlier this month, Kate Handel, a nearby resident and parent, warned that the vacant property was becoming a haven for alcohol and drug use. Illegal dumping and bonfires have occurred on the property, she noted, and now people were taking their vehicles off-roading near an area where children play.

"There's things there that shouldn't be happening in Moss Beach," she said. "Moss Beach is quiet and beautiful. It's counter to why we're here."

But teenagers and skateboarders are hardly the only people wandering onto the Moss Beach Ruins. Local residents have long used the area for hiking and dog-walking.

The Coastside has many large plots of open space that are privately owned but treated as de facto parklands with hiking trails. People who venture onto these private areas usually see their actions as benign, but public agencies and private landowners say the practice puts unfair liability on the property owner. In recent years, the city of Half Moon Bay has begun fencing off acres of open space rather than risk a lawsuit from someone injured on the property.

On Friday, a number of San Mateo County departments met with Supervisor Don Horsley to discuss the property and what should be done. The skate park was reportedly built without any permits or insurance, but the property owner never stepped in to put a halt to it. Horsley believes the county will eventually clean up the site and later charge the owner for the labor. In that scenario, the skate park would be closed down and likely removed, he said.

"Unless the (property owner) decides they want a skate park ... it would eventually have to go," he said. "It's what would be called an attractive nuisance."

The skate park and the surrounding 11 acres of empty land are all owned by the California School Employees Association, a union for non-faculty school workers based out of San Jose. Neighbors and county officials say the CSEA has not returned calls to ask about the property, but a union spokesman did return a call from the Review on Monday afternoon.

The school union has owned the property since 1969, said Frank Polito, CSEA director of communications, but its unclear why the property was purchased in the first place.

“The bottom line is we don’t have a set plan for the property,” he said. “We’re still considering what our options may be for the property.”

CSEA has sent maintenance crews each year to paint over graffiti and remove garbage, Polito said. The organization also installed fences and gates to bar entry, but those fences would later be removed by locals, he explained.

The Moss Beach Ruins used to be a cluster of World War II barracks, and locals in the area believe the owners wanted to develop it into a housing subdivision. Victor Lee, a resident in the area for 30 years, said developers have visited the property to investigate drilling wells, but they lacked the water needed to build out the site.

“In the last decade, more and more vehicles are going down there,” Lee said. “The neighbors are a little alarmed, and I don’t blame them.”

Meanwhile, a series of skate parks began popping up on the site for at least the last decade. Most were temporary wooden ramps that could be easily torn down or rebuilt, but the skate park’s builders recently became more ambitious.

About two years ago, a tight-knit group of skate-park designers collaborated to build a permanent skate course on the Moss Beach property. Building the park took hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars, said Kevin, a San Francisco resident who participated in the construction and asked that his last name not be used. When they came in, the spot was already littered with garbage, Kevin said, and his group tried to treat the area well. They installed trash cans and a barbecue pit near the skate park and encouraged people to keep it clean.

“It’d be a shame to close it down. This is a spot where kids have always gravitated,” he said. “If this property was off-limits then I think negative activities like drug-use would probably increase because you’d have less people being stewards.”