

# Clam Beach Access Mat Public Meeting

## February 17 & 18, 2022

### February 17, 2022

Approximately 10 individuals in attendance, including three equestrians (one horse) and one Sheriff deputy. The horse that was there was able to walk on the mat without any issue.

#### Questions and Comments received:

- Dogs are ok on the mat.
- Some horses may be afraid of the texture and shininess of the mat.
- An adjacent path on sand without obstacles would be helpful.
- Some horses may need training to walk on the mats.
- The mats are sturdy.
- Question: What will beach wheelchair users do when they reach the end of the mat? Answer: Some users may choose to turn back, while others may choose to go beyond the end of the mat, onto the waveslope (the portion of the beach near the shoreline that is inundated at high tides) if the sand is wet and hard-packed.
- People liked and were surprised that sand sifts through the mats.
- Following this meeting, one of the attendees sent an e-mail with the following message:

“Thank you for holding the event Thursday for the new Clam Beach Trail Mats. I’d heard through the horse community a horse who tested it would not cross, and I was initially very concerned. Your event made me feel comfortable that they are going to work out the way you intend and will allow both accessibility for the mobility challenged and equestrian use. I’m glad more people will be able to enjoy Clam Beach.”

### February 18, 2022

Approximately 20 individuals in attendance, including three equestrians (two horses), three Sheriff deputies, and three representatives from Tri-County Independent Living. One horse was not interested in walking on the mat and one horse had no problem walking on the mat.

#### Questions and Comments received:

- Question: Who is going to maintain the mat? Answer: County Parks.
- Question: Will the mat impact western snowy plovers? Answer: No, because the access corridor is already busy with people and plovers choose to nest away from high-traffic areas. There are no documented nest sites within the access corridor. The additional usage of the access corridor as a result of the mat will be negligible.
- Question: Can the trail be widened? Answer: Yes, the plan includes widening of the trail to ensure a minimum of a five-foot wide path next to the mat. (There seemed to be consensus that “it could work” if the trail were widened adjacent to the mat.)

- Question: How is the mat going to do with blowing sand and high tides? Answer: Sand will sift through the mats, to a point. Periodic clearing of the mats may be necessary. The mat will be installed in sections that can be removed if damaged or adjusted seasonally due to higher winter tides.
- Question: Can lighting be added to make the trailer safer? Answer: No, lights are not related to the current project purpose.
- Tri County Independent Living representatives were very happy and supportive of the project. One member with low vision stated, "I feel very safe, I can use the mat to get back in the direction I came without getting lost." She also had her guide dog who walked the mat with ease. The mat allowed her to walk the sand and use the mat as a guide. Tri County suggested having a tactile map that demonstrates the trail.
- A man shared that he had brought his 90-year-old friend out earlier in the month, who was so happy to experience the beach with his family and friends but struggled to navigate the sand. He said the mat will make it easier for people to access the beach and he is happy to see this project.
- The mat feels stable and secure to walk on.
- Some individuals stated that the access corridor at the southern parking lot should be improved for beach wheelchairs, equestrians, and vehicles.
- An equestrian stated that it's best to have adequate distance between horses and other users in the event that a horse spooks, to avoid causing injury. Widening the trail to ensure a parallel path would help with safety.
- The Sheriff deputies did not have any concerns about the mat being compatible with emergency vehicle access to the beach.

### **North Coast Journal Article**

The following article was posted in the North Coast Journal on February 24, 2022, following the public meetings:

# 'Night and Day'

New mats make Clam Beach accessible to the mobility-challenged

BY ELAINE WEINREB



PHOTO BY ELAINE WEINREB

Travis Smith tests a plastic mat path designed to make Clam Beach accessible to the mobility-challenged.

If you are an able-bodied person in Humboldt County, it is not difficult to get to the beach. But if you use a wheelchair or walker, or are blind, it is a lot harder. Hard enough to effectively keep most disabled people away from the beach, said Alissa Norman, community advocate for Tri-County Independent Living, an advocacy organization for the disabled community.

To remedy this situation, the county Parks Department is installing a long plastic mat made of separate plastic sections along a flat and well-used trail at Clam Beach. The trail begins at the paved parking lot just off Clam Beach Drive, about a half-mile south of the Crannell Road intersection. It crosses about one-tenth of a

mile of soft sand that's easy enough for dogs, horses and able-bodied humans to traverse, but an impenetrable barrier for anyone in a wheelchair.

The Parks Department had previously purchased some beach-accessible wheelchairs but discovered they were only usable on wet, hard-packed sand near the shoreline. Those wheelchairs have been temporarily removed from service.

Now, the department has purchased the mats, made of recycled polyester fabric, to cover the soft sand on the trail. The flexible individual mat sections are fastened to the ground by spikes and have tiny filter holes that allow sand grains to pass through the porous surface.

"These have already been successfully used at Muir Beach and Stinson Beach and in southern California beaches, as well," said Karen Clower of the county's ADA Compliance Team.

The county held an open house on the beach Feb. 17 and Feb. 18. One section of mat had been laid down near the parking lot; Clower said there were two others farther down the trail, but the work was obviously just in its beginning stages. The project is expected to cost about \$30,000.

A few beach patrol officers from the county Sheriff's Department gave their thumbs up to the project. A small group of equestrians were less pleased, saying that the shiny fabric spooked their horses. Although the trail seemed wide enough for a horse to pass without stepping on the mat, the equestrians worried about a possible conflict between riders and wheelchair-users. Others said the mats would soon be buried by the blowing sand that characterizes Clam Beach. Uri Driscoll, a spokesperson for the equestrian group, wondered if all the necessary protocols had been followed in terms of getting a permit from the California Coastal Commission.

Hank Seemann, deputy director of the Environmental Services Division of the county's Public Works Department, said there was no record, either from the county or the state, of endangered snowy plover nests being found close to the trail.

These issues did not seem to bother the three representatives of Tri-County Independent Living who attended the open house. Juliannah Harris, the organization's assistive technology coordinator, and her guide dog Guthman stepped out onto the mat and walked to the end of the section. Harris described herself as having both low vision and a mobility problem.

"It's like night and day," Harris said about her short walk. "Walking the mat was nice. It was firm and stable. I felt very secure. I was able to follow the mat with

my cane, and my guide dog understood the edges of the mat. I could also follow the edge of the mat with my cane and walk in the sand alongside it without fearing that I would go astray."

Her only suggestion was the Parks Department add a tactile sign for the benefit of the visually impaired.

Once the trail is completed, mobility-impaired people will again be able to reserve one of the county's beach wheelchairs by going to <https://humboldt.gov/2526/Beach-Wheelchairs> or they can use their own personal devices, which Clower said would work on the mats as well.

*Elaine Weinreb (she/her) is a freelance journalist. She tries to re-pay the state of California for giving her a degree in environmental studies and planning (Sonoma State University) at a time when tuition was still affordable.*