



Beach Access Structures on Your Shoreline Property



This guidance provides direction for development of beach access structures under the new SMP and is advisory only. The SMP recognizes that private landowners want to enjoy beach access on their properties, and allows for private beach access structures in most circumstances.

Understanding Shoreline Management Program (SMP) Policy for Shoreline Vegetation Conservation

The following policies highlight the County's basis for establishing standards for beach access structures:

- “Beach access structures should be located, designed, and maintained in a manner that minimizes adverse impacts on shoreline ecology” and any adverse effects shall be “...fully evaluated and mitigated.”
- “Beach access structures may not be appropriate in some areas because of safety hazards or sensitive ecological conditions... Some properties will have view-only access to the neighboring waters.”
- “Beach access structures should be designed to minimize the amount of clearing, grading, excavation, and other forms of shoreline alteration so that they don’t require substantial bank or slope modifications.”



What is a beach access structures?

Beach access structures include stairways, trams, walkways, and towers that provide pedestrian access across a moderate to high bank to a beach. Beach access structures are generally required for banks higher than 10 feet in height, and historically many beach access structures have required some shoreline modification to serve as a footing.

As seen in the photo above, the beach access structure associated with residential use would likely be permitted under the SMP – the stairway is not located on an exceptional feeder bluff shoreline, and was constructed as a narrow corridor minimizing impacts to shoreline buffer vegetation.



Why are beach access structures regulated?

Beach access structures inherently require some modification of shoreline riparian vegetation, banks, and associated ecological functions. As such, the SMP provides provisions for beach access structures to avoid and minimize these impacts.

Where are residential beach access structures allowed?

Beach access structures are allowed as an accessory use in all shoreline environments except for Natural and High Intensity. Where allowed as associated with single-family residential use, beach access structures typically require a Shoreline Exemption Permit or Substantial Development Permit. For Natural designated shorelines, a Conditional Use Permit is required for any structure providing private residential access. Beach access structures are only allowed when public beach access is not available within 500 feet of the residential lot (or lots) to be served. Joint use beach access structures are generally preferred over structures providing access for a single lot.

Beach access structures are never allowed on exceptional marine feeder bluffs. Such bluffs provide significant sediment contribution to the marine shoreline, and are highly erosive. See Ecology's Coastal Zone Atlas for locations of exceptional feeder bluff shorelines - <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/coastalatlas/> (choose "Go to coastal map" and turn on "Coastal landforms" layer).

What should I consider when planning a beach access structure?

All allowed beach access structures must be located, designed and operated to avoid critical areas and net loss of shoreline ecological functions / processes. This means associated construction is generally prohibited waterward of the OHWM, and that proposals should not require shoreline stabilization. The proposal should not increase landslide or erosion hazards, or interfere with natural erosion and accretion processes of the shoreline. Evaluation and mitigation for impacts to habitat, slope stability, sediment transport and water quality should be provided.

Beach access structures must meet the following minimum criteria:

- The clear width of any walkway, staircase, tower, or tram shall be a minimum of 3 feet and maximum of 5 feet
- Landings may not exceed 50 square feet each
- The structure may not extend more than 12 vertical feet above the bank or slope to minimize impacts on shoreline views

- If any access landing is necessary waterward of the OHWM (because staying landward is infeasible), it must be limited to a small pier/pile-supported pedestrian landing platform that is 25 square feet or less (and otherwise consistent with the SMP)
- Mitigation sequencing must be used to avoid, minimize, and compensate for any impacts; this means that enhancement of shoreline buffer vegetation will likely be required.

Designing and evaluating the impacts of a beach access structure requires the assistance of a qualified professional. As a first step, the County recommends that you call the Planning and Community Development Department (<https://www.islandcountywa.gov/planning/>) to ask questions about your project. County staff will suggest next steps to ensure that planning and design for your beach access structure is consistent with the SMP.

Can an existing beach access structure be maintained, even if it doesn't meet the design standards of the new SMP?

Existing lawfully constructed, nonconforming beach access structures may be repaired or replaced in kind, upon shoreline permit approval.



This reach of Holmes Harbor includes several homes with separate beach access structures, all of which have landings that include overwater structures, and in some places hard armoring with fill. The SMP encourages joint use beach access structures, and requires that landings must be landward of the OHWM (or if this is not feasible, limited to 25 square feet on piles).