

Coastal Commission survives stormy seas

By JOHN ROBINSON

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SANTA CRUZ — For 20 years, the California Coastal Commission has stood like a battered seawall holding back the forces of development that threatened to swamp the coast.

But continued budget cuts make it increasingly difficult to fulfill their mandate to protect the shoreline, commissioners say.

"We are being slowly strangled by Gov. Wilson," said Lily Cervantes, commission vice chairwoman, who is a Salinas-based lawyer. "Environmentalists ought to be alarmed. At least (former Gov.) Deukmejian was more honest and said he was going to kill us outright."

In the past 10 years, the commission's budget has been cut in half, and half of the staff let go. The result, according to administrators, is that the commission can no longer examine development proposals as thoroughly as it once did, and does less enforcement of permit violations.

"We've had to shift our resources, and changed the level of the project we get involved in," said Jack Liebster, a com-

mission-spokesman. "There are a lot more waivers of permit requirements, and what we once would have had a public hearing on are now consent agenda items."

The cuts threaten to achieve what former governor Ronald Reagan and Deukmejian attempted — to dilute the effectiveness of the commission, which has sweeping powers over development in a five-mile wide strip from Tijuana to Oregon.

According to officials, this year will be little different, as the commission is facing a cut of about \$600,000 in its current \$9.06 million budget.

The commission was created in 1972 when voters passed the Coastal Zone Conservation initiative, the state's first publicly passed environmental legislation.

To balance the 12-member commission, the appointments are made in blocks by different agencies, including the governor, the Senate Rules Committee, and by the Assembly speaker.

Coastal Commission decisions range from minor grading permits to rules on off-shore oil production, which can involve hundreds of millions of dollars.

Most of what the commission does, how-

ever, is rule on development proposals. Almost from its inception, the commission has been a political battlefield, and one that is not untouched by scandal.

The commission is still feeling the fallout left by former commissioner Mark Nathanson, who was indicted last May by a federal grand jury on eight counts of racketeering, extortion, conspiracy, obstruction of justice and income-tax evasion.

Nathanson, a Beverly Hills real-estate agent, had ties to Assembly Speaker Willie Brown. Nathanson was a well-known wheeler-dealer with a reputation as a political "bagman," prized for his ability to raise campaign funds and get things done, according to numerous accounts of his troubles.

Nathanson cut quite a figure on the Coastal Commission with his expensive tailored suits and ever-present cellular telephone. During meetings he could usually be found talking on his phone or huddled with developers in the back of the room, according to commissioners.

His votes were usually pro-development, according to commissioners, who said the fate of multimillion-dollar projects could depend upon one swing vote.

In published accounts, Nathanson has been accused of demanding kickbacks for his votes to approve everything from additions to the homes of movie stars in Malibu to major projects.

Despite criticism of Nathanson's votes from environmentalists and politicians such as Assemblyman Tom Hayden, D-Santa Monica, Brown stuck by him.

Nathanson finally was forced to resign from the commission after former state Sen. Alan Robbins implicated him in an extortion scheme. Robbins later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to prison for racketeering and income tax-evasion.

Nathanson's attorney, Stephen Braga of Washington, D.C., says his client is innocent.

"Mr. Nathanson's position is that he has never asked anyone for money for his vote on the Coastal Commission and that anything Sen. Robbins says should be viewed with extreme suspicion, since everything he has done is to further his own interests," Braga said.

Braga's clients have included Richard Nixon, Ted Kennedy, and Ed Meese.

Three current commissioners refused to comment on Nathanson, saying that the

commission works well together and that his behavior doesn't represent theirs.

Coastal Commission staff members also declined to discuss Nathanson.

The pressures for development in some areas, especially in Southern California, have increased, commissioners said.

"Part of the problem is that the population has grown, but we still only have 1,200 miles of coast and a lot more people want to get to it," Liebster said.

Opening all the state's beaches to the public, including those in Malibu and on ranches north of Santa Barbara, is one goal not yet reached.

"It boils down to one thing — money," Cervantes said. "The very wealthy, even members of environmental groups, live in gated communities. They support preserving access to the environment as long as they don't have to open their gates."

Environmentalists praise the commission's work. "I'd say the Coastal Commission has been very effective, considering they have been devastated by the governor," said Dan Haifley, former executive director of Save Our Shores. "They've been knocked down more times than I can count, but they keep getting up fighting."