

Jane Yokoyama and the Coastal Commission:

'I get these agenda packets that sometimes weigh 100 pounds.'

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Coastal Commission member Jane Yokoyama needs 32 hours to prepare for one commission meeting.

Important job with a powerful agenda

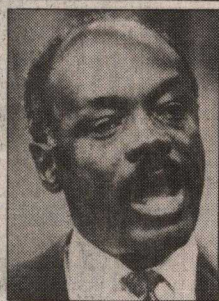
By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — When Jane Yokoyama interviewed for a spot on the state Coastal Commission, she didn't know if the position paid, how often members met, or even where.

Nevertheless, Assembly Speaker Willie Brown immediately offered her the job.

"I just thought it was some group you get named to," Yokoyama said. "I didn't even know how many people were on it."

Yokoyama, who is serving her second four-year term on the Santa Cruz City Council, now knows the Coastal Commission job doesn't pay and takes huge



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— Jane Yokoyama, on her interview with Willie Brown

amounts of time. She also knows that the commission has far-reaching power over development in roughly a 5-mile-wide swath stretching from Tijuana to Oregon.

Single decisions by the commis-

sion may affect business transactions worth millions of dollars as well as the coastal environment.

In other words, it's an important position, as Yokoyama soon discovered about the time the agenda packets began arriving on

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UPS trucks by the boxload.

"I get these agenda packets that sometimes weigh 100 pounds," Yokoyama said. "I have to read it all before every meeting, I really do. It takes 32 hours to prepare for a meeting."

Yokoyama's route to the Coastal Commission began with a telephone call from Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Carmel, who suggested her name to Brown, who had an appointment to fill and wanted a woman of color.

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Yokoyama

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The appointment procedure was new to Yokoyama, who agreed to go to San Francisco to meet the speaker. She promptly got lost in San Francisco and was over an hour late for her appointment.

As she walked into the speaker's office, she saw it was filled with serious men in expensive suits, all with briefcases awaiting an audience with Brown.

Yokoyama merely wanted to apologize for being late, but was shown right through, leaving a lobby full of men wondering just who this woman with such pull was.

"I wasn't taking it real seriously because I didn't think I had a chance," she said. "We talked and he was very impressive."

Brown wanted to know who Yokoyama "owed" and what groups she belonged to.

"He said 'I'll never tell you how to vote, and I expect you to do honest work,'" she said.

Yokoyama said she'd take the job. Brown told her to wait, and think about it for a day.

She took a month, never returning a call to Brown until Farr called to ask what was holding up the appointment.

"I forgot about it," Yokoyama said. "Because I wasn't really sure I could do it."

In December 1991, Yokoyama accepted and began a crash course in the politics of coastal development. It is a world of lobbyists, mundane matters and big money, including off-shore oil production worth billions of dollars.

According to Yokoyama, a cadre of lawyers tracks the issues, votes and comments of each commissioner to gauge the political winds.

Yokoyama said she has not become embroiled in the politics of many of the issues.

"For example, on offshore-oil issues, the oil people know I am against off-shore oil so they don't bother contacting me," she said. "My vote is pretty easy to figure out."

Her votes are usually determined by what is better for the environment and ensuring that

beaches remain accessible for everyone.

Another reason for the relative dearth of lobbyists is tough new laws requiring that commissioners report all contacts and conversations with lobbyists and developers to commission staff. Failure to do so can be prosecuted as a misdemeanor with fines of up to \$7,000 per violation. The laws have limited much of the lobbying that marked commission decisions in the past, commissioners say.

"What's most alienating for me is that I have to approve these Malibu beach homes that are 10,000 square feet," Yokoyama said. "The homeless in (the city of Santa Cruz) could all fit into that house. It's most alienating for me to see such massive developments and see this wealth. Most people who live on the coast are very wealthy and that's not my life or experience."

Yokoyama grew up in Salinas. Her background is in teaching, immigration policy and low-income housing issues. She is director of the Santa Cruz County Immigration Project.

She had never run for office before deciding to seek a City Council seat in 1988. She was backed by the Rainbow Coalition and was the top vote-getter, later becoming mayor.

She is one of three appointees on the Coastal Commission who must be elected officials, and when she leaves the City Council, she will have to leave the commission also.

In the past year, there have not been any major Coastal Commission decisions affecting the Santa Cruz or Central Coast area.

One reason is that much of the coastal protection issues have already been decided in the Santa Cruz area, partially due to the strength of local government's commitment to the environment, Yokoyama said.

"I'd say the coast is our number one asset, which therefore makes the Coastal Commission a very important commission," Yokoyama said.