

Coast panel defiant, keeps SC office open

FROM STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

The California Coastal Commission is defying Gov. George Deukmejian and refusing to close regional offices in Santa Cruz and Santa Barbara, despite the governor's veto of funds in the 1987-88 state budget to staff the offices.

Deukmejian ordered the commission to close the offices in his veto message when he cut \$319,000 out of the commission's budget in July.

But the commission has ignored those orders, deciding instead to absorb the budget cuts elsewhere and to keep operating the offices, which have been open since 1973.

"The way we read the Coastal Act, how we use our money is our decision," said the commission chairman, Michael Wornum. "We are a statutory agency with a job to do. We look after 1,000 miles of coast and we need offices near there. Now, the governor is not going to be pleased about this, but he doesn't like the Coastal Commission anyway."

State laws that govern the commission and oversee the use of the state's coastal lands specifically mandate offices in Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara and Humboldt counties, said David Loomis, assistant executive director of the Santa Cruz office.

The commission went along with Deukmejian's proposal to cut the Humboldt office in 1985 to try a tactic of "peaceful co-existence," Loomis said. Now that it's obvious that tactic has failed, the commission has decided to take a strong stance against the governor. Fueling the commission's action are open recommendations that the commission's regional

office in San Diego be closed in the summer of 1988, Loomis said. If all these recommendations were carried out, the commission would be left with two offices, one in San Francisco and one in Los Angeles.

"Only the commission itself is empowered to close the offices," Loomis said. "The governor says close them. The commission says no we won't, in fact we can't. For the short run, this office stays open."

A spokesman for Deukmejian said the governor's legal staff and the state Department of Finance are trying to decide whether the commission has the authority to ignore Deukmejian's order.

"We are questioning whether it is legally permissible," said Deukmejian press secretary Kevin Brett.

When Deukmejian cut the commission's funds in a line-item veto of the state budget, his message said, "These reductions reflect the reduced workloads resulting from the completion or near completion of local coastal plans in these areas."

Deukmejian has been a long-standing opponent of the Coastal Commission, arguing during his 1982 campaign for governor that the commission's responsibilities should be handled by elected rather than appointed officials.

"The governor still believes management of the coastline should be turned over to accountable city councils and county boards of supervisors," Brett said.

Wornum, a former Democratic legislator from Marin County, said the commission expects its move will anger

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Deukmejian, but he said members believed keeping the offices open was important enough to risk crossing the governor.

"There is nothing he can do about taking more money from us this year because the budget process is finished," Wornum said. "But he could fulminate and take more money from us next year. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Wornum and commission staff members said they believe the regional offices are needed to manage the coast and to help local governments prepare their coastal plans.

Commission staff has concluded it would be less expensive and more efficient to keep the regional offices in Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz open, Loomis said.

It would cost more to run the Santa Cruz office from San Francisco than to keep it where it is, Loomis said. Not only are rents higher in San Francisco, but a faraway office would necessitate constant traveling by state and local officials, as well as by developers and property owners conducting business with the commission.

The staff also bases its conclusion on its experience with the closing of the regional office in Humboldt County, Loomis said.

Officials and private citizens now have to frequently travel between San Francisco and Crescent City to process coastal zone permits. The trips cost everyone time and money, Loomis said.

"It would really hamstring our service to the public," Wornum said. "Local officials or anyone getting a permit to develop something would have to drive to San Francisco or Long Beach."

The California Coastal Commission was established by Proposition 20 in 1972. In the 1976 Coastal Act, the Legislature set a deadline of 1981 for

drawing local coastal plans. That deadline was later extended to 1984. Many plans are still unfinished, according to commission staff.

Brett said Deukmejian's philosophy is to close down the regional offices when plans in the area are completed.

"The action the governor took in July to close the regional offices is consistent with the action in 1985 (when he closed a north coast office in Humboldt County)," Brett said.

But Wornum said Deukmejian is closing offices based on deadlines, not on whether the plans are completed.

"If the local governments don't produce the plans for us, there is nothing we can do," Wornum said. "And the more we're cut, the longer it will take to get them done."

Besides refusing to close the Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz offices, the commission voted last week to submit a budget proposal for next year that includes keeping those two offices and reopening the north coast office.

Wornum said commissioners expect their 1988-89 budget request to "go over like a lead balloon with the governor." But he said it was time to take a stand against Deukmejian's cuts of commission staff, which has been reduced from 172 to 110 since Deukmejian took office.

"It has been sort of a death by 1,000 cuts," Wornum said. "Every year he was cutting 10 percent or 20 percent off our budget. We reached a point last year where we agreed we wouldn't scream to the press or the Legislature if that was the end of the cuts it. Then this came out of the blue. We decided to dig our toes in and say you can't cut us anymore or we won't have a commission."

Brett said he could not comment about any deals between Deukmejian and the commission, but Finance Department spokeswoman Lois Wallace said nobody there knows of an agreement.