

After 40 years of activism, beaches' chief resigns

Peter Douglas praised by environmentalists, scorned by coastal property owners

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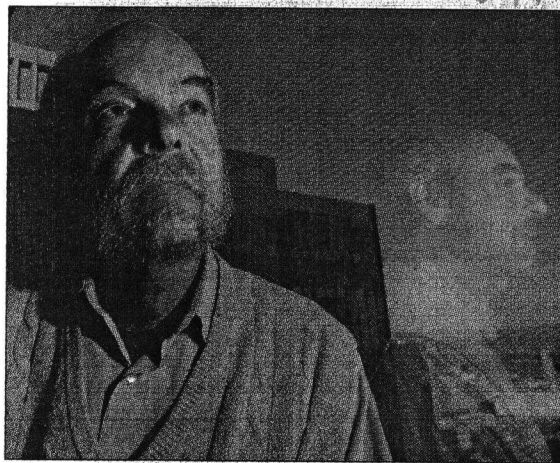
WATSONVILLE — Peter Douglas, who for four decades wielded unrivaled influence over arguably the most picturesque stretch of land and sea anywhere, announced Wednesday he is retiring as head of the California Coastal Commission.

Douglas, who has battled

lung cancer, said he is stepping down in November for health reasons and will take an immediate medical leave until that time. He made the announcement at a Watsonville meeting of the Coastal Commission, which oversees land-use policies along California's 1,100-mile coastline.

"My vision has always been

SEE DOUGLAS ON A2



Peter Douglas, executive director of the California Coastal Commission, is seen in March 2005 at in his office in San Francisco. Douglas, who has worked 40 years to keep one of the world's most beautiful coastlines largely undeveloped, announced his retirement on Wednesday.

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DOUGLAS

Continued from A1

that this agency will continue to carry out the public trust in a resolute, effective, strong way to protect the coast for future generations, and to maximize opportunities for the public to use and enjoy their coast," Douglas said in a lengthy statement accompanying the announcement.

Douglas, who could be a fierce opponent of development, was not available for comment at the commission's Wednesday meeting, and declined requests for interviews. He did not return a call for comment.

As the commission's top staffer, Douglas never wavered from a crusade to preserve and expand public access to the coast nor shrank from his many critics. But Douglas' activism on coastal issues goes back before he was made executive director in 1985.

Douglas was a co-author of Proposition 20, which created the commission in 1972. As a consultant to a legislative committee, he co-drafted the 1976 Coastal Act, a document that carries almost biblical importance among environmentalists.

"There's no question that Peter Douglas has been the heart and soul of California's coastal protection program for the last 40 years, but the legacy that he's left is a very strong program, dedicated staff, (and) an activated public," said Ann Nothoff, California advocacy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"If there's a face of coastal conservation and preservation, it's Peter Douglas," said Mark Stone, the commission's vice chair and a Santa Cruz County supervisor.

No stranger to controversy, Douglas survived numerous attempts by governors and the Legislature to remove him. He was a frequent critic of cuts to commission funding, and a fierce defender of the commission's independence. He was not afraid to mix it up.

"I've worked under seven governors, and every one of them has disliked the Coastal Commission because they can't control us," Douglas said at a Sacramento conference on the Coastal Commission held this summer.

"I've seen governors and senators and

Assembly speakers all try to roll Peter Douglas, and they weren't successful," said former Assemblyman Rusty Areias, who once chaired the Coastal Commission, at the same conference.

Over the years, the commission has tangled with everyone from Hollywood celebrities to San Francisco's exclusive Olympic Club, forcing the latter to open up membership to women and minorities. It has played a key role in shaping the local landscape as well, including today's anticipated decision on the proposed beachfront La Bahia Hotel.

Born in Germany during World War II, Douglas, who is Jewish, immigrated with his family to the U.S. via Mexico in the early 1950s. He earned his undergraduate and law degrees from UCLA, and over the years has collected numerous environmental awards.

Former Assemblyman Fred Keeley, now Santa Cruz County's treasurer, called Douglas one of the 100 most important Californians in state history.

"The California Coastal Act had a more profound land use effect on 1,100 miles of coastal California than any other land use act in the state," Keeley said. "It has done more to enhance and preserve the dry side of the coast than anything in the history of the state."

State Secretary for Natural Resources John Laird, who said he was notified privately a few days ago that Douglas would step aside, said Douglas was "totally fearless" in defending the coast.

"There are a very small list of people that you can credibly say changed the face of California," Laird said. "He's one of those people."

But there have long been bitter resentments toward the commission and Douglas in particular, especially when private property rights conflicted with public access to the coast.

The commission is a frequent litigator in court, and property rights advocates say the commission has cost coastal homeowners millions when trying to refurbish their homes, often extracting easements or other public passages as conditions of approval.

"It is kind of frustrating from our perspective the kind of praise he's getting," said Paul Beard, a principal attorney with the Pacific Legal Foundation.

"The idea that this guy's some kind of hero is foreign to us and the thousands of property owners that happen to live in the coastal zone. ... One would hope in this change in leadership, we replace a zealot with someone who's a little more pragmatic."

Areias concurred that the Coastal Commission can deploy a heavy hand.

"It's crazy what some of these people have to go through," Areias said in June. "People love their Coastal Commission ... as long as they don't have to go before it."

Senior Deputy Charles Lester has served in Douglas' role during health-related absences, and is considered a candidate to replace Douglas. The executive director serves at the pleasure of the commission, which is expected to discuss a succession plan at its September meeting.

Douglas has said he is proud of how the commission invites public participation in decision-making, and has warned of the dangers of having a public that is not engaged on coastal issues.

"I think the biggest threat to coastal protection is ignorance and apathy," he said recently.

Nothoff agreed, saying she thought new generations of Californians might take California's coastline, much of it preserved from development and serving as an international draw for tourists and nature-lovers, for granted.

"That's what they've grown up with. They haven't seen it threatened the way that they did back in the '70s, from the closed-gate communities and the sprawl on the coast," Nothoff said.

In his retirement statement, Douglas urged people to keep up the fight.

"I think the California coast is one of the greatest repositories of untold stories. People have to understand, it's like all relationships. You can't take our relationship with the coast for granted, because it took a lot of sweat, blood and tears to preserve it so we have what we have today," Douglas said.

He continued: "These things didn't just happen. The coast is what it is because a lot of people worked really hard and sacrificed to protect it. And if we want it to be there for our children, we have to keep fighting to protect it. In that way, the coast is never saved, it's always being saved."