

Coastal Commission approves Children's Pool rope barrier/seasonal closure until 2029

BY ASHLEY MACKIN-SOLOMON

Unanimously — and with very little board deliberation — the California Coastal Commission voted last week to approve a 10-year permit extension to close La Jolla Children's Pool beach from Dec. 15-May 15 annually, and install a 152-foot guideline rope the remaining months of the year.

During the June 13 meeting at the Best Western on Shelter Island, Coastal Program Analyst Melody Lasiter gave a 20-minute presentation about the history and the conditions of the Pool. She noted the staff recommendation was to extend the permits until 2029 to 1) close the beach by way of a post and chain at the middle level stairs during harbor seal pupping season (Dec. 15-May 15), and 2) use the guideline rope to encourage distance between humans and harbor seals the remaining months.

However, beach-access advocates argued the information given was incorrect and favored the beach closure from the onset.

"Children's Pool is located in a highly visible, easily accessible area," Lasiter said. "With the construction of the breakwater, a popular recreation area for swimmers and divers and tourists was created, as the breakwater provides a walkway and a calmer beach environment. The sloping sandy that is beach protected from wave activity also created a habit for harbor seals to haul out — or come to beach for essential biological



PHOTOS BY ASHLEY MACKIN-SOLOMON

Beach closure supporters Jenny McReynolds, Pam Thomas, B. Schmidt, Shane Nolan, Karla Nolan, C. Martinez, Ellen Shively, Carol Archibald and (front) Janet Anderson, while on a break from the daylong meeting.



Commissioner Erik Howell of San Francisco moved to approve staff recommendation by a way of a unanimous 'yes' vote.

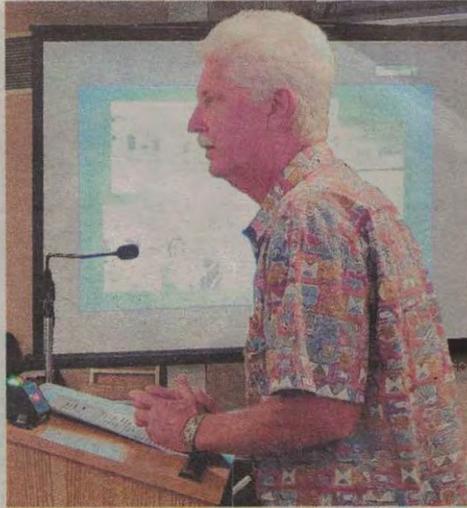
functions such as rest, thermal regulation, molting, giving birth and nursing pups.

"Since the 1990s, there has been ongoing controversy as to how the seals and their habitat should be protected, how public access should be preserved, and whether seals and people can share the space without harm to the people or the seals."

Noting the "relatively small beach area" of the beach, Lasiter said a distance of 50 feet between harbor seals and people has been recommended. But beach-goers not respecting appropriate distances with a refined system, she added, has caused "harm and harassment of the seals. ... Over the years, the seals have been subjected to many disturbances such as people approaching or surrounding the seals to take pictures, making loud noises, attending to pet the seals, and exiting and entering the water too closely."

Lasiter elaborated on the City measures that have been taken since 2006 to provide harbor seal protection, but allow human access. These include the City installing a 130-foot rope to separate humans and harbor seals during the annual pupping season in 2010; extending the rope to 152 feet in 2012, and having it in place year round; and implementing a seasonal beach closure in 2014.

"Fortunately, the City has indicated during the first seasonal beach closure in 2014-2015 was effective in significantly reducing the number of flushing incidences (when harbor seals retreat to the water). ... Since then the number of flushing incidences has



Beach-access advocate Ken Hunrichs addresses Coastal Commissioners.

decreased, with only one reported in the 2017-2018 season. Therefore, the City has proposed to extend the permit to provide continued protection for the harbor seals for the next 10 years. ... This area is, and continues to be, a suitable and desire harbor seal haul-out area."

Lasiter added the rookery is rare for the Southern California area, and that there are other beaches along the La Jolla coast for human access.

City representatives offered little additional comments beyond their support for the extended closure and rope barrier.

83 residents wish to speak

During public testimony, a whopping 83 speaker slips had been submitted for those wanting to address the board. But in the interest of time, Commissioners gave each side 25 minutes for collective presentations (to be divided as each group saw fit), followed by individual speakers at one minute each.

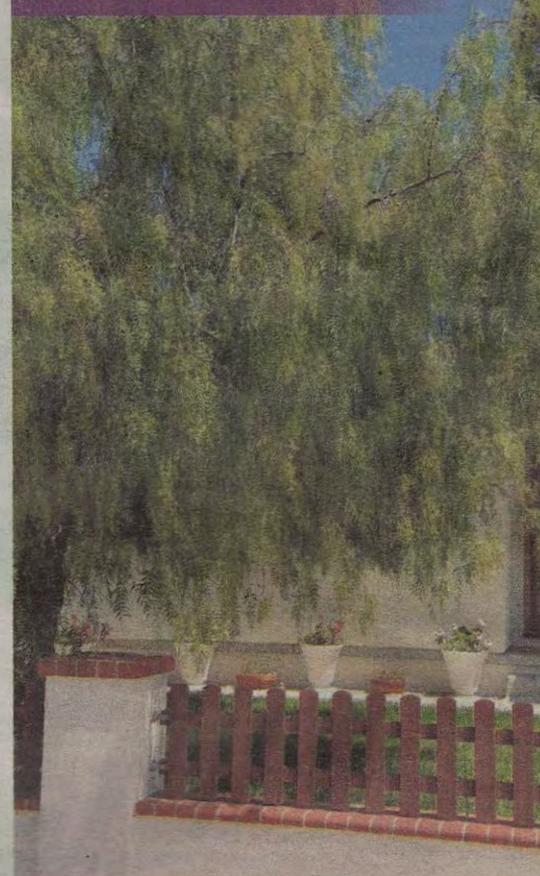
For those who are following the issue, the viewpoints from each side will be familiar.

Those in favor of the continued rope barrier and beach closure system — many carrying yellow "Approve Pupping Season Closure" signs and matching stickers — argued that the system is an "elegant compromise" that allows for harbor seal protection and human access.

Presenters showed videos and photos from before the rope and closure system was in place, and the subsequent harassment of the

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In the crowd, supporters hold signs that read 'Approve Popping Season Closure.'



Supporters hold up signs and posters in favor of the harbor seal pupping season closure.

PHOTOS BY ASHLEY MACKIN-SOLOMON

FROM CHILDREN'S POOL, A5

harbor seals; and offered data suggesting the "peace" that has come from the system, including decreased harassment incidents.

Those opposed to the closure argued there were measures not adequately taken to explore alternatives, and that the beach had historically been used by humans.

Mike Costello, representing the La Jolla Community Planning Association, explained the board is "the recognized community planning group to the City" and that the board drafted recommendations that the City could carry out as an alternative to the 10-year rope and closure, including extending the permit by only one year; and "disagreed" with the proposal before the board, given that La Jolla is an

ocean recreation destination for people.

Beach-access advocate Ken Hunrichs added that the City has "studied" problems, such as changes in water and sand quality due to harbor seal waste, but didn't "solve" them. He argued human safety polices were of higher priority than the harbor seal "which are not threatened or endangered."

After a handful of individual speakers offered additional perspectives and clarifying comments from the board, acting chair Steve Padilla opened the floor to questions or additional Commissioner comments, and there were none.

"Not everyone at once," he joked. "The Chair doesn't typically make a motion, but I could in this case." Instead, Commissioner Erik Howell of San Francisco, who also voted for the seasonal closure in 2014, moved to

approve staff recommendation by a way of a unanimous "yes" vote.

Before the vote was called, Padilla opined: "We have a natural proclivity to want to assert our exclusivity dominion over nature sometimes and not recognize opportunity where we can share that appropriate, this is certainly one of those times. ... But I think it's important as we go forward, we keep a close eye on information getting to the Commission."

At the announcement of the decision, sighs of relief and applause broke out from those that favored the extension, and hugs followed.

Children's Pool volunteer and docent Pam Thomas said she was "relieved and joyful" about the approval. "The seasonal beach closure and viewing guideline rope has been working. I'm down there hours every week, I

can say the system works. Before this was in place, there was conflict between people, it affected the seals and this system is for the best. All moms deserve a safe and peaceful place to give birth."

A smiling Seal Conservancy of San Diego president Jane Reldan said she was "elated," adding that "I would like to see the system in place for perpetuity, but I'll take the 10 years."

However, a "disappointed" Hunrichs said: "The Children's Pool has been stolen from us for 10 years," and that he wished the Commissioners had more thoroughly vetted the information that was given to them, on which they based their decision. He added beach-access advocates would convene to determine what — if any — next steps they would take. ♦