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**REGISTER**

## Coastal panel chief retires, O.C. reacts

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By **PAT BRENNAN** / ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

The retirement of a [state Coastal Commission](#) veteran of development battles, including a proposed toll road and the cottages at Crystal Cove, was not a surprise for Orange County's environmental activists or its building advocates.

And both praised the dedication of Peter Douglas, the commission's executive director, who announced Wednesday that he will be stepping down in November to wage his own battle with lung cancer.

"The irony of our work is that our greatest achievements are the things you don't see," Douglas, 69, told the commission at the start of its meeting in Watsonville. "It's the wetlands that haven't been filled. It's the access that hasn't been lost. It's the agricultural lands that haven't been converted. It's the highly scenic and environmentally sensitive habitat areas that haven't been spoiled or destroyed."

But advocates for both environmental protection and development said they hope their views will strongly influence the commission's decisions after Douglas steps down.

"It's a lamentable loss of a hero of coastal protection," said Angela Howe, a staff attorney with the [Surfrider Foundation](#) in San Clemente. "There's absolutely a concern to fill his shoes with the best person possible. We're losing a person who has a legacy which will live on."

Douglas said he's spent 41 years as a coastal protection advocate. He was not only with the commission from the beginning, but helped create it. He co-authored legislation that established the agency and worked to gain voter approval in 1972.

He co-wrote the California Coastal Act, made permanent by the legislature in 1976, and became the agency's chief deputy a year later.

In 1985, he became its third executive director.

He was at the center of high-profile fights, including proposed development at Hearst Ranch, Monterey Bay, and the beaches of Malibu, the restoration of the [cottages at Crystal](#)

[Cove](#) and the defeat of the proposed Foothill South toll road through San Onofre State Park.

"It's an end of an era," said Rob Thornton, an Orange County attorney who often represents development interests and was involved in the toll road fight. "He has been tough, to say the least."

Thornton said Douglas was a major factor in the Coastal Commission's decision to reject the Foothill South toll road project in 2008 -- despite, he said, years of work and planning by a variety of agencies at the state and federal level.

"All those determinations pretty much get rejected out of hand," Thornton said.

He also felt the commission reached beyond its appropriate jurisdiction.

"Only a very small portion of that was within the state coastal zone," he said.

Laer Pearce, an Orange County [development consultant](#), says he remembers what he considers the heavy-handed effects of Douglas and the commission on homeowners.

"He really does leave a mixed legacy," Pearce said. "I think most Californians agree that it was his commitment to the coast that has protected us from the worst that could happen. But in the process of protecting the coast from the worst, he shattered the dreams of many people who just wanted to build a house."

While Douglas was not involved in the early conflicts over the possible replacement of historic beach cottages at Crystal Cove with a luxury resort, he and the commission were essential to making them what they are now -- an affordable beach experience in the restored cottages -- said Laura Davick, founder of the [Crystal Cove Alliance](#).

That included \$2.9 million from the Commission to get the restoration project off the ground.

"Peter has always been very, very passionate about Crystal Cove," Davick said. "I'm hopeful that Peter's passion will continue at the commission after his retirement."

She said she'll be working with the commission, and with Douglas's successor, to complete the restoration.

"Peter Douglas is someone that you could never replace," she said. "He had such a huge impact along the coast of California. We look forward to working with whoever is in his position in the future. There's only one Peter Douglas, though. I think they broke the mold."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.