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CHAIR: EXPANDING ACCESS TO
CALIFORNIA'S NATURAL RESOURCES

Assembly California Legislature



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February 11, 2016

To: California Coastal Commission Agency Staff

Re: Open Letter to Coastal Commission Staff following the Removal of Executive Director Dr. Charles Lester

Dear Coastal Commission Staff,

With the inexcusable firing of your Executive Director, Dr. Charles Lester, each of you undoubtedly has grave concerns for the future of the Agency and coastal resources. By removing Dr. Lester in the way that the Commissioners did, following a day-long hearing with virtually uninterrupted public comment supporting Dr. Lester's work, it is tempting to conclude that the Commissioners have sent the message to you that your work during his tenure has not been respected or valued. You may think that you have pushed developers too far by requiring them to prioritize protecting coastal resources, allow for coastal access and consider the effects of their proposed development on those with adjacent properties or down coast. While some Commissioners had that intent, the people of California clearly feel very differently.

Thanks to your critical work, all Californians, regardless of income or ownership of coast-adjacent property, enjoy access to a preserved coastal environment in a way that no other coastal state residents experience. And make no mistake: while your actions have angered a minority of individuals who argue for *unchecked development* policies, your work to protect the coast has resulted in significant measurable economic benefits to entire coastal communities who rely on recreation, tourism, and fisheries, as well as immeasurable environmental benefits to this one-of-a-kind, fragile, special coastal ecosystem. Though your successes are too numerous to list, I am compelled to provide some key examples of the work that you have done for which Californians are grateful:

- In August 2015, the California Coastal Commission unanimously adopted a California Sea Level Rise Policy Guidance document prepared by Dr. Lester and staff. Training events designed to assist local communities in implementing this document are underway.
- Commission staff is currently supporting the update of Local Coastal Plans across the state; staff is providing direct financial assistance and support to local communities revising these plans to address sea level rise and climate change impacts.
- In 2014, the Governor and Legislature expanded the Commission's authority to impose fines against those impeding the public's right to access beaches. With this new authority, Dr. Lester and staff have successfully eliminated obstructions to beach access around the state. Staff has also significantly reduced processing times for coastal development permits and appeals under Dr. Lester's direction.

Prior to the vote to remove the director, certain Commissioners blamed Dr. Lester, and by extension, you as staff, for certain deficiencies which are actually the responsibilities of the Commissioners to address. When an organizational deficiency at a governing board exists, such as a lack of staff diversity, it is the Commissioners' obligation to address that deficiency in appropriate ways. It is a dereliction of duty to complain about a deficiency without using the Commission's power to respond to the deficiency – for instance, by holding a public hearing on the topic, establishing the scope of the issue, detailing an action plan, and seeking measureable results. These Commissioners have blamed Dr. Lester for what actually amounts to their own failure.



Given the depth of the failure of the Commission to address its own concerns, and given that this failure clearly results from the inappropriate influence of lobbyists through activities that constitute a violation of public disclosure laws in virtually all other interactions with California governing boards, I will jointly introduce, along with Speaker Toni Atkins and other colleagues, legislation to close this loophole. It is my hope that this legislation will end the unethical, opaque practice of allowing lobbyists to lobby Commissioners without the public's knowledge on who is being represented or what is being requested.

Former Coastal Commission Executive Director Peter Douglas was often quoted as saying, "The coast is never saved. It's always being saved." The removal of Dr. Lester is an ominous reminder that that is indeed the case.

I urge you to continue your important, invaluable work in protecting coastal access to all Californians and in protecting coastal resources now and in the future.

Sincerely,



Mark Stone
Assemblymember, 29th Assembly District