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Achieving abundance requires reforming the California Coastal Commission



An empty lot at 35075 Beach Road is the site of a proposed two-story duplex development which was approved by the city, but is being appealed by the Coastal Commission at Capistrano Beach in Dana Point, CA, on Friday, Dec. 15, 2023.



By **SHAWN VANDIVER**

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In their new book “Abundance,” journalists Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson lay out a vision for how blue states can build more — and build better — by embracing urgency, reform and accountability. California should be the flagship of that vision. Instead, it has become a warning sign — where bureaucracy, not boldness, reigns.

From housing to clean energy to modern transportation, our state is sinking under the weight of its own systems — bogged down by delays, cost overruns and inefficiencies that erode public trust and prevent meaningful progress.

To be blunt: California’s processes are suffocating progress. And the worst offender is the California Coastal Commission.

The commission, a state agency originally tasked with protecting California’s coastal resources, has become a notorious example of how well-intentioned entities can drift from their mission and actively undermine the public interest. What was meant to protect coastal access has become a bureaucratic anchor dragging the state down.

For years, project delivery has slowed due to the commission’s involvement. Countless proposals — from urgently needed housing to clean transportation alternatives to vital infrastructure upgrades — have been stalled by unnecessary reviews, vague requirements and multiple veto points. This dysfunction feeds a growing narrative: that progressive government can’t deliver.

But it’s not just the delay — it’s the unpredictability. Local governments and developers must navigate a maze of restrictions without any clear sense of what the commission will approve. That uncertainty kills good projects before they start.

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Take the state's housing crisis. In 2021, the city of Los Angeles approved a plan to replace a vacant Jack in the Box with 39 apartments. The City Council voted unanimously in favor. But residents appealed to the Coastal Commission, triggering a drawn-out review. Two years later, the appeal was thrown out. And as we sit here in 2025, the Jack in the Box is still standing — and the housing still isn't.

If California truly wants to lead the nation into a future of prosperity, it must embrace a mindset of urgent action.

We've shown we can do it. When disaster strikes — floods, fires, earthquakes — the state acts quickly. In response to the Los Angeles wildfires, Gov. Gavin Newsom issued executive orders to fast-track rebuilding efforts. Those orders specifically suspended Coastal Commission rules to avoid delays. If the commission weren't a barrier, why the need to sidestep it?

The truth is, our elected leaders know the commission is a problem. Over the past few years, a handful of legislators have attempted reforms, but nothing transformative has taken root. That needs to change. Progressives should use the momentum behind the Abundance movement to take on this powerful entity that has held back progress for far too long.

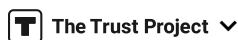
The governor and state leaders should use their authority to remove commissioners who protect the status quo and replace them with leaders committed to building over bureaucracy. Whether through legislation or a vote of the people, we must return the commission to its original mission — protecting coastal access — and place strict guardrails on its ability to block critical projects.

We can still protect what makes California beautiful — but we cannot let nostalgia or outdated processes keep us from building the future our communities deserve.

To quote Klein and Thompson, "modern liberalism should not be about how much we spend but about how much we build." California's leaders should put those words into action — and start by building a Coastal Commission that puts abundance at the center of its mission.

Shawn VanDiver is chairman of the San Diego Convention Center board.

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