

La Jolla Light

Parks & Beaches group launches project to maintain public access to La Jolla Cove

A working group will explore 'immediate, interim and long-term solutions' regarding human/sea lion interactions



Issues related to people and sea lions at La Jolla Cove have triggered much discussion in recent months. (Ashley Mackin-Solomon)



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Despite public commitments from local government officials that beach access at La Jolla Cove will remain open to humans, the La Jolla Parks & Beaches group wants to be more hands-on in the discussion about people and sea lions at the local landmark.

At its Sept. 23 meeting, the LJP&B board voted unanimously to create a working group for a La Jolla Cove Access Project.

The group's mission is to "align the community [and] create and execute a plan assuring continued public recreational access to The Cove." It plans to work with applicable city of San Diego departments, federal agencies and various other interested parties.

Among its stated goals and responsibilities are:

- "Maintain focus on both human and pinniped security"
- "Work with experts to study/understand eco-balance of sea life and implications on long-term access and health of The Cove"
- "Provide responsible updates/communication at public forums"
- Obtain funding for related projects as needed

"We are looking for immediate, interim and long-term solutions," said working group co-chair Stephanie Kelly. "We recognize that there is information we don't have, but waiting a couple of years to get that information doesn't solve the immediate problems. So we're taking this in steps."

The group will not address beach areas beyond La Jolla Cove. "We want to stay focused on The Cove so we can make progress and move forward," Kelly said. "We're trying to get to something we could accomplish."

LJP&B board member Diane Kane argued that tourism management also should be a stated goal. She noted that in recent hearings about conflicts related to sea lions and humans at La Jolla Cove, tourists uneducated in how to behave around the marine mammals were seen as the primary problem rather than people who live in the area and are familiar with how to navigate The Cove when sea lions are present.



Members of the La Jolla Parks & Beaches board meet Sept. 23 at the La Jolla/Riford Library. (Ashley Mackin-Solomon)

Though public access to La Jolla Cove remains unrestricted, the years-long issue of beach access rights for people and protections for marine mammals against human misconduct has led in La Jolla to partial-year public closure of the Children's Pool, which is home to harbor seals, and year-round closure of Point La Jolla, where sea lions haul out.

On July 3, Michael Ruiz, chief park ranger for the San Diego Parks & Recreation Department, [issued recommendations](#) emphasizing "the importance of staying away from sea lions in the water or ... on the beach" at La Jolla Cove.

His advisory came as the city cited recent videos of people getting too close to sea lions at The Cove, sometimes resulting in scary and potentially dangerous reactions from the animals.

Soon after, some members of La Jolla planning groups called for the city to create a sea lion management plan that would include methods for [detering or even removing](#) the pinnipeds in the interest of preserving human access.

A week later, at the July 11 La Jolla Town Council meeting, San Diego City Councilman Joe LaCava reiterated earlier statements that he would fight for [continued public access](#) to the beach at La Jolla Cove.

"I want to make sure everyone here knows that it is a very bright line that I am going to maintain public access to the beach and to the water at La Jolla Cove," said LaCava, a La Jolla resident who represents the community as the council member for District 1.

Later in July, the La Jolla Parks & Beaches board [discussed the issue](#) of people and pinnipeds at a standing-room-only meeting, with many in attendance arguing that uneducated tourists were a big part of the problem.

On Sept. 12, the Town Council [held a forum](#) about La Jolla Cove featuring comments from agencies including the Sierra Club Seal Society, San Diego lifeguards, La Jolla Cove Swim Club, San Diego Tourism Authority and more.

A common complaint was a lack of clarity about who is responsible for enforcement of laws applicable to human/sea lion interactions.

In light of being told that many agencies are responsible for small parts of the issue but none is responsible for it all, several people proposed ideas for projects to keep people a safe distance from pinnipeds without relying on one entity.

The Town Council, for example, is working to produce a video in hopes that tourists planning a trip to La Jolla will see it and learn how to navigate the area and the sea lions.

Many speakers said current signs addressing interactions with sea lions are ineffective, and they proposed stronger wording such as “Enter at your own risk.”

Some recommended changing city laws so violators can be ticketed.

San Diego officials said in August that the city is pursuing [several new strategies](#) to try to keep people and sea lions apart at La Jolla Cove while keeping The Cove open to public access.

The measures include enhanced education and signs at the entrances to La Jolla Cove, revised public announcements and better collaboration with other agencies.

City spokesman Benny Cartwright said the signs are expected to be up by the end of the year.