

**CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION**

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**Coastal Commission elects housing and tenants' rights advocate as new leader**

Newport Beach, Calif. — Santa Cruz County Supervisor Justin Cummings was elected on Wednesday to lead the California Coastal Commission as chair of the agency's 15-member board. He was appointed to the agency in 2023 as the locally elected representative for the Central Coast.

Cummings, who received unanimous support from his fellow commissioners at a public hearing in Newport Beach, will take over the role from former Chair Caryl Hart at the end of the December meeting.

"It's an honor to turn the gavel over to Commissioner Cummings," said Hart. "He's an accomplished scientist with a deep commitment to the natural world, affordable housing and social equity issues. He's the right person for the job in this moment."

Dismayed by the city's housing affordability crisis, Cummings started his political career as a tenants' right organizer in the city of Santa Cruz. In 2018, Cummings ran for City Council and became one of two African American men to serve on the City Council for the first time in history. In 2020, he became the first African American man to serve as Mayor of Santa Cruz.

In 2022, Cummings became the first African American elected to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. As an elected official, he has prioritized affordable housing,

tenant protections and mental health services, as well as habitat protection and disaster preparedness for wildfire.

Cummings grew up on the South Side of Chicago and graduated from Eastern Illinois University with a bachelor's degree in Spanish and Biology. He moved to California in 2007 to attend UC Santa Cruz, where he studied invasive species management and forest restoration. In 2013, he received a Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology from the University of California. From 2013 to 2015 he pursued a post-doc studying the impacts of climate change on the Everglades at Florida International University.

Starting in 2015, Cummings helped create several nonprofits at UCSC, including the Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program, which prepares college students from diverse backgrounds for careers in environmental conservation. He also spearheaded the university's CITRIS Initiative for Drone Education and Research.

The Coastal Commission has [12 voting members](#), including six public members and six elected officials from coastal regions. The Governor, Senate Rules Committee and the Speaker of the Assembly each appoint four seats on the commission. The agency also has three non-voting members representing the State Lands Commission, the California Natural Resources Agency and the California Department of Transportation.

Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre was elected Vice Chair during Wednesday's public hearing. Cummings and Aguirre will serve one-year terms.

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