

The Public Trust Doctrine

California State Lands Commission

I. Origins of the Public Trust

The origins of the public trust doctrine are traceable to Roman law concepts of common property. Under Roman law, the air, the rivers, the sea and the seashore were incapable of private ownership; they were dedicated to the use of the public.¹ This concept that tide and submerged lands are unique and that the state holds them in trust for the people has endured throughout the ages. In 13th century Spain, for example, public rights in navigable waterways were recognized in *Las Siete Partidas*, the laws of Spain set forth by Alfonso the Wise.² Under English common law, this principle evolved into the public trust doctrine pursuant to which the sovereign held the navigable waterways and submerged lands, not in a proprietary capacity, but rather “as trustee of a public trust for the benefit of the people” for uses such as commerce, navigation and fishing.³

¹Institutes of Justinian 2.1.1.

²*Las Siete Partidas* 3.28.6 (S. Scott trans. & ed. 1932).

³*Colberg, Inc. v. State of California ex rel. Dept. Pub. Works* (1967) 67 Cal.2d 408, 416.

After the American Revolution, each of the original states succeeded to this sovereign right and duty. Each became trustee of the tide and submerged lands within its boundaries for the common use of the people.⁴ Subsequently admitted states, like California, possess the same sovereign rights over their tide and submerged lands as the original thirteen states under the equal-footing doctrine.⁵ That is, title to lands under navigable waters up to the high water mark is held by the state in trust for the people. These lands are not alienable in that all of the public's interest in them cannot be extinguished.⁶

II. Purpose of the Public Trust

The United States Supreme Court issued its landmark opinion on the nature of a state's title to its tide and submerged lands nearly 110 years ago, and although courts have reviewed tidelands trust issues many times since then, the basic premise of the trust remains fundamentally unchanged. The Court said then that a state's title to its tide and submerged lands is different from that to the lands it holds for sale. "It is a title held in trust for the people of the State that they may enjoy the navigation of the waters, carry on commerce over them, and have liberty of fishing" free from obstruction or interference

⁴*Martin v. Waddell* (1842) 41 U.S. (16 Pet.) 367, 410.

⁵*Pollard's Lessee v. Hagen* (1845) 44 U.S. (3 How.) 212, 228-29.

⁶*People v. California Fish Co.* (1913) 166 Cal. 576, 597-99; *City of Berkeley v. Superior Court* (1980) 26 Cal.3d 515, 524-25.

from private parties.⁷ In other words, the public trust is an affirmation of the duty of the state to protect the people's common heritage of tide and submerged lands for their common use.⁸

But to what common uses may tide and submerged lands be put? Traditionally, public trust uses were limited to water-related commerce, navigation, and fishing. In more recent years, however, the California Supreme Court has said that the public trust embraces the right of the public to use the navigable waters of the state for bathing, swimming, boating, and general recreational purposes. It is sufficiently flexible to encompass changing public needs, such as the preservation of the lands in their natural state for scientific study, as open space and as wildlife habitat. The administrator of the public trust "is not burdened with an outmoded classification favoring one mode of utilization over another."⁹

The Legislature, acting within the confines of the common law public trust doctrine, is the ultimate administrator of the tidelands trust and often may be the ultimate arbiter of permissible uses of trust lands. All uses, including those specifically authorized by the Legislature, must take into account the overarching principle of the public trust doctrine that trust lands belong to the public and are to be used to promote public rather

⁷*Illinois Central R.R. Co. v Illinois* (1892) 146 U.S. 387, 452.

⁸*National Audubon Society v. Superior Court* (1983) 33 Cal.3d 419, 441.

⁹*Marks v. Whitney* (1971) 6 Cal.3d 251, 259-260.

than exclusively private purposes. The Legislature cannot commit trust lands irretrievably to private development because it would be abdicating the public trust.¹⁰ Within these confines, however, the Legislature has considerable discretion.

The Legislature already may have spoken to the issue of the uses to which particular tide and submerged lands may be put when making grants of these lands in trust to local government entities. Statutory trust grants are not all the same--some authorize the construction of ports and airports, others allow only recreational uses and still others allow a broad range of uses.

A further and often complicating factor is that granted and ungranted lands already may have been developed for particular trust uses that are incompatible with other trust uses or may have become antiquated. Some tidelands have been dedicated exclusively to industrial port uses, for example, and in these areas, recreational uses, even if also authorized by the trust grant, may be incompatible. Similarly, tidelands set aside for public beaches may not be suitable for construction of a cannery, even though a cannery may be an acceptable trust use. Piers, wharves and warehouses that once served commercial navigation but no longer can serve modern container shipping may have to be removed or converted to a more productive trust use. Historic public trust uses may have been replaced by new technologies. Antiquated structures on the waterfront may be an

¹⁰*Illinois Central Railroad v. Illinois, supra*, at 452-53.

impediment rather than a magnet for public access and use of the waters. Public trust uses may and often do conflict with one another. The state and local tidelands grantees, as administrators of their respective public trust lands, are charged with choosing among these conflicting uses, with the Legislature as the ultimate arbiter of their choices.

For all these reasons, a list of uses or a list of cases without more may not be as useful as an analysis of public trust law applied to a specific factual situation.

III. The Leasing of Tidelands

A few principles established by the courts are instructive in analyzing under the public trust doctrine the leasing of public trust lands for particular uses. For example, it was settled long ago that tidelands granted in trust to local entities may be leased and improved if the leases and improvements promote uses authorized by the statutory trust grant and the public trust. Leases for the construction of wharves and warehouses and for railroad uses, i.e., structures that directly promote port development, were approved early in the 20th century.¹¹ Later, leases for structures incidental to the promotion of port commerce, such as the Port of Oakland's convention center, were held to be valid because although they did not directly support port business, they encouraged trade, shipping, and commercial associations to become familiar with the port and its assets.¹² Visitor-serving

¹¹*San Pedro etc. R.R. Co. v. Hamilton* (1911) 161 Cal. 610; *Koyner v. Miner* (1916) 172 Cal. 448; *Oakland v. Larue Wharf & Warehouse Co.* (1918) 179 Cal. 207; *City of Oakland v. Williams* (1929) 206 Cal. 315.

¹²*Haggerty v. City of Oakland* (1958) 161 Cal.App.2d 407, 413-414.

facilities, such as restaurants, hotels, shops, and parking areas, were also approved as appropriate uses because as places of public accommodation, they allow broad public access to the tidelands and, therefore, enhance the public's enjoyment of these lands historically set apart for their benefit.¹³

These cases provide three guidelines for achieving compliance with the public trust when leasing tidelands for construction of permanent structures to serve a lessee's development project: (1) the structure must directly promote uses authorized by the statutory trust grant and trust law generally, (2) the structure must be incidental to the promotion of such uses, or (3) the structure must accommodate or enhance the public's enjoyment of the trust lands. Nonetheless, when considering what constitutes a trust use, it is critical to keep in mind the following counsel from the California Supreme Court: The objective of the public trust is always evolving so that a trustee is not burdened with outmoded classifications favoring the original and traditional triad of commerce, navigation and fisheries over those uses encompassing changing public needs.¹⁴

¹³*Id.* at p. 414; *Martin v. Smith* (1960) 184 Cal.App.2d 571, 577-78.

¹⁴*National Audubon Society v. Superior Court, supra*, at p. 434.

IV. Promotion of Trust Uses and Public Enjoyment of Trust Lands

Installations not directly connected with water-related commerce are appropriate trust uses when they must be located on, over or adjacent to water to accommodate or foster commercial enterprises. Examples include oil production facilities, freeway bridges and nuclear power plants.¹⁵ Hotels, restaurants, shops and parking areas are appropriate because they accommodate or enhance the public's ability to enjoy tide and submerged lands and navigable waterways. The tidelands trust is intended to promote rather than serve as an impediment to essential commercial services benefiting the people and the ability of the people to enjoy trust lands.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the essential trust purposes have always been, and remain, water related, and the essential obligation of the state is to manage the tidelands in order to implement and facilitate those trust purposes for all of the people of the state.¹⁷ Therefore, uses that do not accommodate, promote, foster or enhance the statewide public's need for essential commercial services or their enjoyment tidelands are not appropriate uses for public trust lands. These would include commercial installations that could as easily be sited on uplands and strictly local or "neighborhood-serving" uses that

¹⁵See *Boone v. Kingsbury* (1928) 206 Cal.148, 183; *Colberg, Inc. v. State of California ex rel. Dept. Pub. Work*, *supra*, at pp. 421-22; and *Carstens v. California Coastal Com.* (1986) 182 Cal.App.3d 277, 289.

¹⁶*Carstens v. California Coastal Com.*, *supra*, at p. 289.

¹⁷Joseph L. Sax, "The Public Trust in Stormy Western Waters," October 1997.

confer no significant benefit to Californians statewide. Examples may include hospitals, supermarkets, department stores, and local government buildings and private office buildings that serve general rather than specifically trust-related functions.

V. Mixed-Use Developments

Mixed-use development proposals for filled and unfilled tide and submerged lands have generally consisted of several structures, including non-trust use structures or structures where only the ground floor contains a trust use. While mixed-use developments on tidelands may provide a stable population base for the development, may draw the public to the development, or may yield the financing to pay for the trust uses to be included in the development, they ought not be approved as consistent with statutory trust grants and the public trust for these reasons. These reasons simply make the development financially attractive to a developer. Projects must have a connection to water-related activities that provide benefits to the public statewide, which is the hallmark of the public trust doctrine. Failure to achieve this goal, simply to make a development financially attractive, sacrifices public benefit for private or purely local advantage. A mixed-use development may not be compatible with the public trust, not because it may contain some non-trust elements, but because it promotes a “commercial enterprise unaffected by a public use”¹⁸ rather than promoting, fostering, accommodating or

¹⁸*City of Long Beach v. Morse* (1947) 31 Cal.2d 254, 261.

enhancing a public trust use.¹⁹ That use, however, need not be restricted to the traditional triad of commerce, navigation and fishing. It is an evolving use that is responsive to changing public needs for trust lands and for the benefits these lands provide.²⁰

Moreover, commercial enterprises without a statewide public trust use may violate the terms of statutory trust grants. Typically, grants allow tidelands to be leased, but only for purposes “consistent with the trust upon which said lands are held.” This term is not equivalent to “not required for trust uses” or “not interfering with trust uses.” Since leases of tidelands must be consistent with statutory trust grant purposes, leases which expressly contemplate the promotion of non-trust uses rather than trust uses would not comply with the terms of the trust grants.

¹⁹*Haggerty v. City of Oakland, supra*, at pp. 413-14.

²⁰*National Audubon Society v. Superior Court, supra*, at p. 434.

For these reasons, non-trust uses on tidelands, whether considered separately or part of a mixed-use development, are not mitigable. That is, unlike some environmental contexts where developments with harmful impacts may be approved so long as the impacts are appropriately mitigated by the developer, in the tidelands trust context, mitigation of a non-trust use has never been recognized by the courts. To the contrary, the California Supreme Court has said that just as the state is prohibited from selling its tidelands, it is similarly prohibited from freeing tidelands from the trust and dedicating them to other uses while they remain useable for or susceptible of being used for water-related activities.²¹

VI. Incidental Non-Trust Use

All structures built on tide and submerged lands should have as their main purpose the furtherance of a public trust use. Any structure designed or used primarily for a non-trust purpose would be suspect. Mixed-use development proposals, however, frequently justify non-trust uses as “incidental” to the entire project. The only published case in California in which a non-trust use of tidelands has been allowed focused on the fact that the real or main purpose of the *structure* was a public trust use and that the non-trust use would be incidental to the main purpose of the structure.²² In this context, the court noted that because the real or main purpose of the structure was to promote public trust uses,

²¹*Atwood v. Hammond* (1935) 4 Cal.2d 31, 42-43.

²²*Haggerty v. City of Oakland, supra*, at p. 413.

non-trust groups could also use the facility, but the non-trust uses must remain *incidental* to the main purpose of the structure.²³ This is the state of the law, and it is supported by good policy reasons as well. If the test for whether a non-trust use is incidental to the main purpose of a development were not applied on a structure-by-structure basis, pressure for more dense coastal development may increase as developers seek to maximize the square feet of allowable non-trust uses. Disputes may arise as to how to calculate the square footage attributable to the proper trust uses versus non-trust uses, with open waterways and parking garages likely being the dominant trust uses and structures being devoted to non-trust uses.

It is beyond contention that the state cannot grant tidelands free of the trust merely because the grant serves some public purpose, such as increasing tax revenues or because the grantee might put the property to a commercial use.²⁴ The same reasoning applies to putting tidelands to enduring non-trust uses by building structures on them. Accordingly, the only enduring non-trust uses that may be made of tidelands without specific legislative authorization are those incidental to the main trust purpose applied on a structure-by-structure basis. Each structure in a mixed-use development on tidelands must have as its primary purpose an appropriate public trust use. If its real or main purpose is a trust use, portions of the structure not needed for trust purposes may be

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*National Audubon Society v. Superior Court, supra*, at p. 440.

leased temporarily to non-trust tenants, provided that the non-trust use is incidental to the main purpose of the structure.

VII. The Role of the Legislature

The Legislature is the representative of all the people and, subject to judicial review, is the ultimate arbiter of uses to which public trust lands may be put. The Legislature may create, alter, amend, modify, or revoke a trust grant so that the tidelands are administered in a manner most suitable to the needs of the people of the state.²⁵ The Legislature has the power to authorize the non-trust use of tidelands. It has done so rarely, and then on a case-specific basis.²⁶ Many of its actions have been a recognition of incidental non-trust uses or of a use that must be located on the tidelands. When these legislative actions have been challenged in court, the courts, understandably, have been very deferential, upholding the actions and the findings supporting them.²⁷

The Legislature has provided a statutory framework for the leasing of tidelands for non-trust uses by the cities of Long Beach and San Francisco grounded on findings that the tidelands are *not required for* (San Francisco) or *not required for and will not*

²⁵*City of Coronado v. San Diego Unified Port District* (1964) 227 Cal.App.2d 455, 474.

²⁶For example, in Chapter 728, Statutes of 1994, the Legislature authorized tidelands in Newport Beach to continue to be put to non-trust uses for a limited term after it was determined that the tidelands had been erroneously characterized and treated as uplands by the city due to incorrect placement of the tidelands boundary.

²⁷See, e.g., *Boone v. Kingsbury*, *supra*, at p. 183 and *City of Coronado v. San Diego Unified Port District*, *supra*, at pp. 474-75; but see *Mallon v. City of Long Beach* (1955) 44 Cal.2d 199, 206-07, 212.

interfere with (Long Beach) the uses and purposes of the granting statute.²⁸ Where, as in these two statutes, the Legislature has authorized in general terms the use of tidelands for non-trust purposes, the statutes' provisions must be interpreted so as to be consistent with the paramount rights of commerce, navigation, fishery, recreation and environmental protection. This means that the tidelands may be devoted to purposes unrelated to the common law public trust to the extent that these purposes are incidental to and accommodate projects that must be located on, over or adjacent to the tidelands. These non-trust uses are not unlimited, for there are limits on the Legislature's authority to free tidelands from trust use restrictions.²⁹

To ensure that the exercise of the Long Beach and San Francisco statutes is consistent with the common law public trust, the tidelands to be leased for non-trust uses must have been filled and reclaimed and no longer be tidelands or submerged lands and must be leased for a limited term. The space occupied by the non-trust use, whether measured by the percentage of the land area or the percentage of the structure, should be relatively small. Finally, any structure with a non-trust use should be compatible with the overall project. Findings such as these are necessary because legislative authorizations to devote substantial portions of tidelands to long-term non-trust uses have generally been

²⁸Ch. 1560, Stats. 1959; Ch. 422, Stats. 1975. These statutes also provide for, *inter alia*, the lease revenues to be used to further trust uses and purposes.

²⁹*Illinois Central R.R. Co. v. Illinois, supra*, at pp. 452-54.

considered by the courts as tantamount to alienation.³⁰

In several out-of-state cases, specific, express legislative authorizations of incidental leasing of publicly-financed office building space to private tenants solely for the purpose of producing revenue have been subject to close judicial scrutiny, although they did not involve tidelands trust use restrictions.³¹ One case involved construction of an international trade center at Baltimore's Inner Harbor with public financing where legislation expressly permitted *portions* of the structure to be leased to private tenants for the production of income. Another was a condemnation case where the statute authorizing the New York Port Authority to acquire a site on which to build the World Trade Center was challenged on the basis that it allowed *portions* of the new structure to be used for no other purpose than the raising of revenue. In both cases, opponents of the projects argued that a publicly financed office building should not be permitted to have *any* private commercial tenants even though the respective legislatures had expressly allowed incidental private use of each building. The state courts in both Maryland and New York held that so long as the primary purpose of the office building was for maritime purposes connected with the port, legislation authorizing the leasing to private

³⁰ *Atwood v. Hammond*, *supra*, at p. 42; see also *Illinois Central R.R. Co. v. Illinois*, *supra*, at pp. 454-53.

³¹ *Lerch v. Maryland Port Authority* (1965) 240 Md. 438; *Courtesy Sandwich Shop, Inc. v. Port of New York Authority* (1963) 12 N.Y.2d 379.

tenants was valid.³² Although both cases involve challenges to financing and condemnation statutes and do not involve the public trust, they are instructive because they demonstrate the importance to the courts, even in the context of public financing and condemnation, that when a portion of a structure is to be leased for the purpose of raising revenues to offset expenses, this incidental non-public leasing must have been legislatively authorized.

VIII. Exchanges of Lands

Situations where a local government or a private party acquires a right to use former trust property free of trust restrictions are rare.³³ In order for such a right to be valid, the Legislature must have intended to grant the right free of the trust and the grant must serve the purpose of the trust. Public Resources Code section 6307 is an example of the rare situation where abandonment of the public trust is consistent with the purposes of the trust. Section 6307 authorizes the Commission to exchange lands of equal value, whether filled or unfilled, whenever it finds that it is “in the best interests of the state, for the improvement of navigation, aid in reclamation, for flood control protection, or to enhance the configuration of the shoreline for the improvement of the water and upland, on navigable rivers, sloughs, streams, lakes, bays, estuaries, inlets, or straits, and that it will not substantially interfere with the right of navigation and fishing in the waters

³²*Ibid.*

³³*National Audubon Society v. Superior Court, supra*, at p. 440.

involved.[] The lands exchanged may be improved, filled and reclaimed by the grantee, and upon adoption by the Commission of a resolution finding that such lands (1) have been improved, filled, and reclaimed, and (2) have thereby been excluded from the public channels and are no longer available or useful or susceptible of being used for navigation and fishing, and (3) are no longer in fact tidelands and submerged lands, the lands are thereupon free from the public trust. The grantee may thereafter make any use of the lands, free of trust restrictions.

In order for such an exchange of lands to take place, the Commission must find that the lands to be exchanged are no longer available or useful or susceptible of being used for navigation and fishing, taking into consideration whether adjacent lands remaining subject to the trust are sufficient for public access and future trust needs; that non-trust use of the lands to be freed of the public trust will not interfere with the public's use of adjacent trust lands; and that the lands that will be received by the state in the exchange not only are of equal, or greater, monetary value but also have value to the tidelands trust, since they will take on the status of public trust lands after the exchange. Only then can the Commission find that the transaction is in the best interests of the state, that the exchange of lands will promote the public trust and that it will not result in any substantial interference with the public interest in the lands and waters remaining.