

Supplementary Material

Chapter 10: The Reagan Era – Individual Rights/Property/Takings

Nollan v. California Coastal Commission, 483 U.S. 825 (1987)

James and Marilyn Nollan owned a bungalow on a beachfront lot in Ventura County, California. In 1982, the California Coastal Commission recommended that the Nollans be given a permit to replace their bungalow with a three-bedroom house only if they agreed to grant an easement on their property that would enable members of the public to more easily have access to a local beach. The Nollans filed a lawsuit, claiming that the requirement that they grant an easement to the general public violated the takings clause of the Fifth Amendment as incorporated by the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. A California court supported their suit on statutory grounds, but that decision was reversed by the California Court of Appeals. The Nollans appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States.

The Supreme Court by 5–4 vote declared that the California Coastal Commission had taken property unconstitutionally. Justice Scalia’s majority opinion ruled that there was not a sufficient connection or nexus between what the Nollans sought (the permit for building a bigger house) and the conditions attached to the permit (the easement to the beach). What connection did Scalia believe the Constitution requires between the purpose of the land use restriction and the condition for obtaining a permit? Did Justice Brennan dispute Justice Scalia’s constitutional rules or his application of those rules? What conditions would Scalia permit California to attach to the permit? What conditions would you permit California to attach to the permit?

JUSTICE SCALIA delivered the opinion of the Court.

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Had California simply required the Nollans to make an easement across their beachfront available to the public on a permanent basis in order to increase public access to the beach, rather than conditioning their permit to rebuild their house on their agreeing to do so, we have no doubt there would have been a taking. To say that the appropriation of a public easement across a landowner’s premises does not constitute the taking of a property interest but rather (as Justice BRENNAN contends) “a mere restriction on its use,” is to use words in a manner that deprives them of all their ordinary meaning. Indeed, one of the principal uses of the eminent domain power is to assure that the government be able to require conveyance of just such interests, so long as it pays for them. . . . We think a “permanent physical occupation” has occurred, for purposes of that rule, where individuals are given a permanent and continuous right to pass to and fro, so that the real property may continuously be traversed, even though no particular individual is permitted to station himself permanently upon the premises.

Given, then, that requiring uncompensated conveyance of the easement outright would violate the Fourteenth Amendment, the question becomes whether requiring it to be conveyed as a condition for issuing a land-use permit alters the outcome. We have long recognized that land-use regulation does not effect a taking if it “substantially advance[s] legitimate state interests” and does not “den[y] an owner economically viable use of his land.” . . . Our cases have not elaborated on the standards for determining what constitutes a “legitimate state interest” or what type of connection between the regulation and the state interest satisfies the requirement that the former “substantially advance” the latter. They have made clear, however, that a broad range of governmental purposes and regulations satisfies these requirements. . . . The Commission argues that among these permissible purposes are protecting the

public's ability to see the beach, assisting the public in overcoming the "psychological barrier" to using the beach created by a developed shorefront, and preventing congestion on the public beaches. We assume, without deciding, that this is so—in which case the Commission unquestionably would be able to deny the Nollans their permit outright if their new house (alone, or by reason of the cumulative impact produced in conjunction with other construction) would substantially impede these purposes, unless the denial would interfere so drastically with the Nollans' use of their property as to constitute a taking. See *Penn Central Transportation Co. v. New York City* (1978).

The Commission argues that a permit condition that serves the same legitimate police-power purpose as a refusal to issue the permit should not be found to be a taking if the refusal to issue the permit would not constitute a taking. We agree. Thus, if the Commission attached to the permit some condition that would have protected the public's ability to see the beach notwithstanding construction of the new house—for example, a height limitation, a width restriction, or a ban on fences—so long as the Commission could have exercised its police power (as we have assumed it could) to forbid construction of the house altogether, imposition of the condition would also be constitutional. . . .

The evident constitutional propriety disappears, however, if the condition substituted for the prohibition utterly fails to further the end advanced as the justification for the prohibition. When that essential nexus is eliminated, the situation becomes the same as if California law forbade shouting "Fire" in a crowded theater, but granted dispensations to those willing to contribute \$100 to the state treasury. . . . Similarly here, the lack of nexus between the condition and the original purpose of the building restriction converts that purpose to something other than what it was. The purpose then becomes, quite simply, the obtaining of an easement to serve some valid governmental purpose, but without payment of compensation. Whatever may be the outer limits of "legitimate state interests" in the takings and land-use context, this is not one of them. In short, unless the permit condition serves the same governmental purpose as the development ban, the building restriction is not a valid regulation of land use but "an out-and-out plan of extortion." . . .

. . . It is quite impossible to understand how a requirement that people already on the public beaches be able to walk across the Nollans' property reduces any obstacles to viewing the beach created by the new house. It is also impossible to understand how it lowers any "psychological barrier" to using the public beaches, or how it helps to remedy any additional congestion on them caused by construction of the Nollans' new house. We therefore find that the Commission's imposition of the permit condition cannot be treated as an exercise of its land-use power for any of these purposes. . . .

JUSTICE BRENNAN, with whom JUSTICE MARSHALL joins, dissenting.

. . . There can be no dispute that the police power of the States encompasses the authority to impose conditions on private development. . . . It is also by now commonplace that this Court's review of the rationality of a State's exercise of its police power demands only that the State "could rationally have decided" that the measure adopted might achieve the State's objective. In this case, California has employed its police power in order to condition development upon preservation of public access to the ocean and tidelands. The Coastal Commission, if it had so chosen, could have denied the Nollans' request for a development permit, since the property would have remained economically viable without the requested new development. Instead, the State sought to accommodate the Nollans' desire for new development, on the condition that the development not diminish the overall amount of public access to the coastline. Appellants' proposed development would reduce public access by restricting visual access to the beach, by contributing to an increased need for community facilities, and by moving private development closer to public beach property. The Commission sought to offset this diminution in access, and thereby preserve the overall balance of access, by requesting a deed restriction that would ensure "lateral" access: the right of the public to pass and repass along the dry sand parallel to the shoreline in order to reach the tidelands and the ocean. In the expert opinion of the Coastal Commission, development conditioned on such a restriction would fairly attend to both public and private interests.

[O]ur standard for reviewing the threshold question whether an exercise of the police power is legitimate is a uniform one. . . . “The term ‘police power’ connotes the time-tested conceptional limit of public encroachment upon private interests. Except for the substitution of the familiar standard of ‘reasonableness,’ this Court has generally refrained from announcing any specific criteria. . . . ‘[I]t must appear, first, that the interests of the public . . . require [government] interference; and, second, that the means are reasonably necessary for the accomplishment of the purpose, and not unduly oppressive upon individuals.’ Even this rule is not applied with strict precision, for this Court has often said that ‘debatable questions as to reasonableness are not for the courts but for the legislature . . .’ . . .

. . . The Commission has sought to discharge its responsibilities in a flexible manner. It has sought to balance private and public interests and to accept tradeoffs: to permit development that reduces access in some ways as long as other means of access are enhanced. In this case, it has determined that the Nollans’ burden on access would be offset by a deed restriction that formalizes the public’s right to pass along the shore. In its informed judgment, such a tradeoff would preserve the net amount of public access to the coastline. The Court’s insistence on a precise fit between the forms of burden and condition on each individual parcel along the California coast would penalize the Commission for its flexibility, hampering the ability to fulfill its public trust mandate.

. . . Even if we accept the Court’s unusual demand for a precise match between the condition imposed and the specific type of burden on access created by the appellants, the State’s action easily satisfies this requirement. First, the lateral access condition serves to dissipate the impression that the beach that lies behind the wall of homes along the shore is for private use only. . . . The burden produced by the diminution in visual access—the impression that the beach is not open to the public—is thus directly alleviated by the provision for public access over the dry sand. The Court therefore has an unrealistically limited conception of what measures could reasonably be chosen to mitigate the burden produced by a diminution of visual access.

. . . Examination of the economic impact of the Commission’s action reinforces the conclusion that no taking has occurred. Allowing appellants to intensify development along the coast in exchange for ensuring public access to the ocean is a classic instance of government action that produces a “reciprocity of advantage.” Appellants have been allowed to replace a one-story, 521-square-foot beach home with a two-story, 1,674-square-foot residence and an attached two-car garage, resulting in development covering 2,464 square feet of the lot. Such development obviously significantly increases the value of appellants’ property; appellants make no contention that this increase is offset by any diminution in value resulting from the deed restriction, much less that the restriction made the property less valuable than it would have been without the new construction. Furthermore, appellants gain an additional benefit from the Commission’s permit condition program. They are able to walk along the beach beyond the confines of their own property only because the Commission has required deed restrictions as a condition of approving other new beach developments. Thus, appellants benefit both as private landowners and as members of the public from the fact that new development permit requests are conditioned on preservation of public access.

. . . State agencies therefore require considerable flexibility in responding to private desires for development in a way that guarantees the preservation of public access to the coast. They should be encouraged to regulate development in the context of the overall balance of competing uses of the shoreline. The Court today does precisely the opposite, overruling an eminently reasonable exercise of an expert state agency’s judgment, substituting its own narrow view of how this balance should be struck. Its reasoning is hardly suited to the complex reality of natural resource protection in the 20th century. I can only hope that today’s decision is an aberration, and that a broader vision ultimately prevails.

JUSTICE BLACKMUN, dissenting.

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I disagree with the Court's rigid interpretation of the necessary correlation between a burden created by development and a condition imposed pursuant to the State's police power to mitigate that burden. The land-use problems this country faces require creative solutions. These are not advanced by an "eye for an eye" mentality. The close nexus between benefits and burdens that the Court now imposes on permit conditions creates an anomaly in the ordinary requirement that a State's exercise of its police power need be no more than rationally based. . . . In my view, the easement exacted from appellants and the problems their development created are adequately related to the governmental interest in providing public access to the beach. Coastal development by its very nature makes public access to the shore generally more difficult. Appellants' structure is part of that general development and, in particular, it diminishes the public's visual access to the ocean and decreases the public's sense that it may have physical access to the beach. These losses in access can be counteracted, at least in part, by the condition on appellants' construction permitting public passage that ensures access along the beach.

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JUSTICE STEVENS, with whom JUSTICE BLACKMUN joins, dissenting.



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