

## Mayor shares details of recently installed 'seal cam' at La Jolla Children's Pool

Feb 1, 2013 By Pat Sherman

San Diego Mayor Bob Filner held a press conference atop the steps to Children's Pool beach Jan. 31, officially unveiling a webcam installed there last week.

The mayor said the city's new "seal cam" is the only one of its kind on the West Coast, and will promote tourism by providing the public with round-the-clock video feed of harbor seals during pupping season.

"Why not watch the seals?" Filner said during a media event the day before. "I want to see the birth of a seal."

Joined by former California Coastal Commissioner Sara Wan, and husband, Larry Wan, of the nonprofit Western Alliance for Nature (WAN) Conservancy — which paid \$40,000 to purchase and install the webcam for the city — Filner told the crowd the device would allow people around the world to experience an "ecological miracle" in an "urban environment."

"To be able to live in this kind of way with respect to nature makes us better human beings," Filner said. "Yes, this beach is for human beings, but we are better when we respect the seals."

The camera was custom-built by the EarthCam company, which has designed similar webcams that provide remote viewing of panda and giraffe births at zoos, and the ongoing construction of San Diego's new downtown library.

The live feed can be viewed on the conservancy's website ([wanconservancy.org](http://wanconservancy.org)) or mayor's website ([sandiego.gov/mayor](http://sandiego.gov/mayor)). Filner also said the seals can soon be viewed on the city's local access TV station, channel 24, during hours when the city is not airing council meetings and other municipal programming.

"When the mayor said I think it's a great idea, we went ahead and we had it built," said Sara Wan, who also thanked former Councilmember Donna Frye, whose "heroic efforts" she said helped her and her husband obtain a Right of Entry permit from the city "as quickly as possible."

"It was kind of a rush job," Wan said.

The permit, signed by Filner Jan. 25, allows installation and maintenance of one video camera atop the condemned Children's Pool lifeguard tower through the end of the seals' pupping season, May 15, 2013, "to monitor and record seal activity."

During the previous day's press event the mayor confirmed that the city is not charging the Wans for using a public facility to operate the camera.

"Actually, the city should be paying us," Sara Wan told the La Jolla Light. "They're the ones who are getting all the publicity ... and it's very expensive to have put up."

The camera includes automatic lens wipers to clear condensation, and infrared lenses so seals can be viewed at night, when they are more likely to give birth. WAN Conservancy employees scan the beach with the camera remotely, periodically zooming in on seals.

Though some beach access proponents fear the camera may also be used to record and intimidate those who choose to walk beyond the current seal rope guideline, EarthCam representative Steven Puglisi said it would not be used to monitor people.

"It's our company policy that we do not do that anywhere," Puglisi said. "The president of the company would never agree to that and is very much anti-big brother."

Larry Wan added, "The best assurance is, if they're not out where the seals are disturbing or harassing them, they wouldn't be in the (camera's) view."

Filner sides with the seals

Filner drew a line in the sand on the issue when he sided with seal advocates in December, lengthening the guideline rope on Children's



Pool beach from 130 feet to 152 feet (arguably the rope's intended length).

After lengthening the rope, Filner ordered city staff to amend its existing rope permits, which it did Jan. 9. A California Coastal Commission spokesperson confirmed that the commission has reviewed and approved the amendments.

Filner told those in attendance that the camera will be used for "scientific" purposes and not for enforcement of the rope barrier — though he assured the public that harassment of seals would not go unpunished.

"If we have somebody here, whether it's a ranger or a police officer all the time until we settle this, that should be enforcement enough," Filner said. "People will be cited for a violation of local and also federal law. ... We'll do it through the proper channels; we don't want to stir up an unnecessary battle here."

On the beach below, diver David Pierce reclined beyond the guideline rope next to a large sign that read: "Beach open for swimming and diving: please respect the wildlife."

Several adults and children, perhaps emboldened by the sign's message, strolled the shoreline beyond the rope.

Though the rope was installed merely as a guideline to deter people from venturing too close to pregnant seals, Filner seemed somewhat unclear of its intended use, at one point chastising adults and children on the beach below. He also said Pierce's sign was not legal and promised to have it and other such signs removed "in a legal way."

"Apparently, some people don't want to abide by the law, or respect nature," Filner said, motioning to the beach. "I'm not sure that these kids are learning either. They're not respectful of nature, and they're not respectful of the law. ..."

"I can find 80,000 places for those kids to swim and to snorkel," Filner said. "I can only find one place for the seals."

Asked by beach access proponent Melinda Merryweather if he knew it is "alright for people to cross the rope," Filner responded, "It is not."

"We were asking for a respectful appreciation of the seals," he added, "and if we can't get it out of respect, we will then do it by ordinance."

Sara Wan said additional human activity on the beach had caused the seals to leave the beach, or "flush," to rocks hugging the adjacent seawall where they were resting as Filner spoke.

Filner told the gathering that the webcam had been vandalized the prior evening, but was back in operation.

According to Larry Wan, the lens had apparently been "sprayed" with fluid. Its wipers were then turned on remotely to clean the lens. Wan said the conservancy paid to have someone come clean the infrared lenses.

Filner called such vandalism "unacceptable."

"We're going to enforce this a lot better," he said. "We cannot allow these few people to spoil this incredible international opportunity for people all over the world."

During her opening remarks, Sara Wan thanked La Jolla seal activist Dr. Jane Reldan for initially proposing the webcam. (Campaign finance reports show that between July and October of 2012, Reldan donated \$850 to Filner's mayoral campaign.)

"I've spent the major part of my life working to protect the coast of California, first as volunteer, then with 15 years on the California Coastal Commission," Wan said. "When Dr. Reldan asked me to get involved, I immediately knew that this was most appropriate for me."

Given the conservancy's financial investment in the camera, Sara Wan said she would like to see it installed again next pupping season, or potentially during the summer if the city and coastal commission were to approve a year-round rope.

"Whenever the rope is present we'd have it — and that may be only during the pupping season — but we haven't made that decision," she said, adding that she hopes donations to the conservancy website will help offset the cost of the camera.

"It would be nice to recover some of it," she said. "We're a small nonprofit and we're doing this service for the city at no charge, and I think the city understands what a benefit it is to them."