

STEVE LOPEZ / POINTS WEST

## **Public's beach is a beauty, but try to find it**

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The new guy hasn't taken over yet, and already I've got to thank Chicago mogul Sam Zell.

If not for the new boss, who struck a deal this week to buy the Tribune Co., I might not have stumbled onto yet another beach access battle pitting wealthy Malibu homeowners against the hoi polloi.

As I said the other day, it seemed only fair to check out whether Zell's seaside Malibu compound was the subject of any access disputes. I've found nothing specific regarding his property, except that way before Zell bought his little castle by the sea, conservationists lost a battle to keep it from being built on a rocky point where Broad and Lechuza beaches meet.

But when I called Steve Hoye of Access for All, the name Lechuza set him off.

"It makes me mad every time I think about it," said Hoye, who for years has kicked sand in the face of moguls and other big shots who have blocked access to beaches owned by the public.

What is it about billionaires who want to buy The Times? This now makes three — Eli Broad, David Geffen and Zell — who have showed up in columns about beach access problems.

Six years ago, Hoye said, \$10 million in state bond money was used to buy a spectacular stretch of Lechuza more than three football fields in length. That means it's yours and mine, dear readers. But chances are you've never heard of it and haven't used it.

"This was a major coup, to buy this beach," Hoye said. "But it's a waste of money if you can't get there, and homeowners are desperate to block its use."

That's a slight exaggeration, but I was glad Hoye knew where to turn off Pacific Coast Highway. There sure wasn't a sign.

And before we could get closer than a quarter of a mile to the public beach, an electronic gate stopped us in our tracks.

The imposing barrier makes it look as if this stretch of coast is off limits, but if you can find parking, as we did, you can make your way through one of three pedestrian gates on Broad Beach Road and start your hike.

"Grandma can't use this beach," Hoye said as we enjoyed the scenery at the bottom of a long, steep staircase.

"They're supposed to maximize access to the beach, and instead they minimize it," he fumed.

Hoye had shown me an Aug. 6, 2006, violation notice from the California Coastal Commission to the city of Malibu.

"Unpermitted gates and signs ... interfere with public beach access," said the warning, which also said traffic cones had been used to discourage public parking.

Zell lives a couple of hundred yards from the public beach in question, but since you have to go through those gates to get to his place or to the surf, I thought it was only fair to ask if he knew anything about the dispute.

So I rang the buzzer at his compound and a female voice answered on the intercom, saying he wasn't in. I asked where he could be reached, then left my name and phone number.

That was about the extent of the conversation, and I've got Hoye as my witness.

A half-hour later an editor reached me on my cellphone. He said Zell had heard about my visit and wanted to know why some guy named Lopez was harassing his house staff. He said he makes himself directly available to those who need to talk to him, and he didn't appreciate me upsetting the help.

Wait a minute, pal. I've harassed people before, and this wasn't harassment.

And another thing. Your plan for buying this company makes me a co-owner, so let me be the first to inform you that you didn't buy another trailer park. This is a newspaper, and it's our job to chase stories even if it means knocking on the boss' door.

And finally, you never called me back.

I walked down along the beach to a couple of guys standing next to a blue Bentley as waves crashed and seals frolicked in the kelp bed. They didn't seem to know much except that former Laker coach Pat Riley had not one but two houses on the beach.

Hoye said Neil Young used to live here too, as did Jack Lemmon, and that Eddie Van Halen was still a resident, along with Galpin Ford poobah Bert Boeckmann and Malibu Councilman and former Mayor Andy Stern.

Stern, who said he didn't know if Zell had any knowledge of the dispute, came out of his house and explained the position of homeowners.

"This has nothing to do with public access," he said. "The public has always been welcome."

I suggested the closed gates seemed to indicate otherwise.

"It gets to be a safety issue if this were to become a Zuma Beach parking lot," Stern said.

I don't know what's more maddening — obstruction by homeowners or the fact the state paid \$10 million for a beach few people have heard of and even fewer people use.

Joe Edmiston of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, which owns the beach, told me his group has just voted to authorize a lawsuit against homeowners to achieve what six years of negotiations has not. There should be disabled parking, and other visitors should be allowed to drive down to the beach and drop off family and gear before parking back up on Broad Beach Road.

"Those gates will come down!" proclaimed Hoye, who also wants to see a restroom and road signs informing the public that Lechuza exists and is all theirs. "The idea is to maximize access, not minimize it."

As I see it, this little dust-up is a perfect opportunity for Sam Zell to get some traction in L.A., and for me to help show my new business partner in the best possible light. Zell can be the one to stick up for the little guy and throw open the gates at Lechuza, and if he needs moral support, I hear David Geffen is looking for something to do.

I volunteer to broker the meeting. But to be honest, boys, I'm getting a little tired of giving you all this free publicity without so much as a barbecue invite.

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