

Staff Report 51

PROPOSED ACTION:

Consider supporting SB 796 (Bradford) that would authorize Los Angeles County to sell, transfer, or encumber Bruce's Beach, a portion of land within Manhattan State Beach, under terms and conditions that the Board of Supervisors determines are in the best interest of the County and the public.

BACKGROUND:

Equity, inclusion, and environmental justice are foundational to the Commission's work and are core focus areas in its new strategic plan. In 2018 and 2019, staff participated in the Government Alliance on Race and Equity Capitol Cohort pilot initiative along with over a dozen teams from other departments. A cohort of 15 – 20 staff spent two years learning about equity, social justice, and the role that state action played in segregation. Staff used that knowledge to create a racial equity action plan. Staff has since formed a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion team that continues to focus on equity, inclusion, and environmental justice. This work is occurring during a time when there is an acute, heightened awareness about the systemic racism that persists today and is responsible for enduring racial inequalities. California was a part of that systemic racism, having adopted many policies over the decades that caused ongoing structural inequalities for Black Americans.

Last year, Governor Newsom signed [AB 3121](#) (Weber), Chapter 319, Statutes of 2020, to establish a task force to study and make recommendations on reparations for Black Americans. The nine-member task force, established to inform Californians about slavery and explore ways the state might provide reparations, will work with the Attorney General's Office over the next year and produce a written report to the Legislature with findings and recommendations. As Governor Newsom stated when he signed the bill: "As a nation, we can only truly thrive when every one of us has the opportunity to thrive. Our painful history of slavery has evolved into structural racism and bias built into and permeating throughout our democratic and economic institutions."

Bruce's Beach was a Black-owned resort that opened in 1912 when a woman named Willa Bruce purchased the first of two lots overlooking the ocean in the City of Manhattan Beach for \$1,225. Willa Bruce built a resort and operated a popular lodge, café, and dance hall, providing a place where Black people could enjoy the coast during a time when beaches and public swimming pools were segregated and inaccessible to people of color. It was the first resort on the West

Coast that served Black families. A few more Black families also bought land and built cottages by the ocean in Manhattan Beach, creating a small community.

From the beginning, the Bruce family and Black visitors faced harassment, threats, and violence from white residents and white supremacist groups, including, **allegedly**, the Klu Klux Klan. Fake "10 minutes only" parking signs were **purportedly** posted to deter visitors. Many Black beachgoers would return from the Beach to find the air had been let out of their tires, and visitors had to walk an extra half mile **around another property in each direction** because of "No Trespassing" signs and security. Despite this harassment and intimidation, the Bruce family persevered and continued to grow their business into the 1920s. In response, white landowners, fearing an "invasion" by Black Americans into predominately white neighborhoods, discovered a legal mechanism to shut down the Bruces' resort. The Park and Playground Act of 1909 allowed condemnation procedures for recreational civic use. White residents leveraged this law to petition the City to use eminent domain to seize the land and convert the area into a public park.

In 1924, Manhattan Beach city officials condemned the neighborhood and seized over two dozen properties via eminent domain--ostensibly to create a public park. The Bruces and three other Black families sued, citing racial prejudice. The Bruces sought \$120,000 in compensation--\$70,000 for their two lots and \$50,000 in damages. Another couple asked for \$36,000. After years of litigation, the Bruces received \$14,500. The Bruce's plots are estimated to be worth **tens of** millions of dollars today. The other families received between \$1,200 and \$4,200 per lot. Despite the stated purpose of acquiring the properties to create a public park, the **City did nothing with the property. It** property sat empty for decades. In 1948, the City transferred the oceanfront parcels to the state, which in 1995, transferred the parcels to Los Angeles County. The 1995 transfer imposed statutory restrictions that the County maintain the property for public recreation and beach purposes in perpetuity. Los Angeles County currently runs a lifeguard center on the site and is interested in returning the property to the Bruce family's descendants but cannot do so with the statutory restrictions.

After the City seized their property, the Bruce family left Manhattan Beach. The City's population is now less than one percent Black. In 2007, the City renamed the park Bruce's Beach. After George Floyd was murdered in May 2020, the Manhattan Beach City Council directed staff to research and present the history of Bruce's Beach for discussion at a City Council meeting. In September 2020, the City Council formed the Bruce's Beach Task Force to research Bruce's Beach and acknowledge the City's racially motivated eminent domain action to acquire the land. The task force was disbanded earlier this year.

SB 796 is about reparations, which is making amends for a wrong or injury, or something done or given to make amends. What underpins the bill are concepts that the Commission has been championing and that are at the forefront of its new five-year strategic plan. A support position from the Commission is an opportunity to

include our voice in support of righting a wrong. America's history is replete with examples of government, motivated by racism, taking land from Black families. The Bruce's Beach land return may seem small in the face of more significant inequities, but is something the state can do today while the reparations task force is working to develop broader, more comprehensive recommendations. Staff recommends support of this bill, particularly because it represents an opportunity to return land wrongfully taken, especially land involving access to the coastline. As Senator Bradford, the bill's author, said: "When it comes to addressing systemic racism, we all need to get involved."

BILL INFORMATION:

SB 796 would allow Los Angeles County to transfer Bruce's Beach land parcels to the Bruce family decedents. The bill would do the following:

1. Authorize Los Angeles County to sell, transfer, or encumber Bruce's Beach under terms and conditions determined by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to be in the best interest of the county and the public.
2. Provide that the following requirements *shall not apply* to Bruce's Beach:
 - a) That the granted lands and improvements be used, operated, and maintained for public recreation and beach purposes in perpetuity.
 - b) A prohibition on making or permitting any other use of the granted lands and improvements.
 - c) A prohibition on commercial development and limit on noncommercial development.
 - d) A prohibition on selling, transferring, or encumbering the granted lands.
3. Require the Department of Parks and Recreation Director, on or before June 30, 2022, to amend the deed to exclude Bruce's Beach from the restrictions imposed on Manhattan Beach.
4. Declare the need for a special statute and an urgency clause.

According to the author, "SB 796 finally rectifies the injustices done to the Bruce Family in the mid-1920s by returning Bruce's Beach to its rightful owners. Charles and Willa Bruce were a young Black couple who created the West Coast's first beach resort owned by and meant for Black Americans. The resort was wildly successful among the Black community, but Manhattan Beach's white residents were not as receptive. The Bruces and other Black families in the area were met with hostility, harassment, and violence from both the City and the Ku Klux Klan. In 1924, the Manhattan Beach Board of Trustees seized the land, condemning the property to build a public park. Yet, once Charles and Willa Bruce were forced off their land,

the City instead kept the land vacant for decades. The Bruce Family were robbed of their land, their business, and their legacy. They were forced to move and live the rest of their lives working for someone else simply because of the color of their skin. Forcing the Bruces off their land contributed to the racial segregation in the City and deprived the Bruce Family of their legacy and generational wealth. By returning this land to the descendants of the Bruce Family, we set precedent for how to deliver the reparations owed to Black Americans including, but not limited to, the descendants of enslaved persons."

According to Los Angeles County, the sponsor, "SB 796 is an urgency measure that would remove Bruce's Beach from the statutory restrictions imposed in 1995 and enable Los Angeles County to transfer the land back to the living descendants of its rightful owners, Charles and Willa Bruce. SB 796 does not constitute a gift of public funds, rather it is a transfer of title back to the rightful owners." "Los Angeles County has the unique opportunity to rectify this nearly 100-year-old historic injustice by returning the land to the descendants of Charles and Willa Bruce. When the land was originally transferred from the State to the County, it included conditions that restrict use and ownership of the land. In order for the County to transfer the land back to the Bruce family, the state needs to remove these restrictions, thus the need for SB 796."

SB 796 is supported by Los Angeles County, Azul, Latino Outdoors, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. There is no opposition to the bill. The Senate approved SB 796 in early June. The bill is pending in the Assembly.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

It is recommended that the Commission:

Support SB 796 (Bradford) that would authorize Los Angeles County to sell, transfer, or encumber Bruce's Beach, a portion of land within Manhattan State Beach, under terms and conditions that the Board of Supervisors determines are in the best interest of the County and the public.