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Returning Bruce’s Beach to its Rightful Owners

In 1912, Charles and Willa Bruce purchased two lots of land along the Strand in Manhattan Beach. Like many other Americans of African descent, the Bruce family had moved West as part of the Great Migration, seeking opportunities to participate in the promise of the American Dream. Shortly after purchasing the land, Charles and Willa Bruce turned the location into a seaside resort that welcomed Black beachgoers from all over Los Angeles and became colloquially referred to as “Bruce’s Beach.”

As the resort gained traction and attracted more beachgoers, many white residents of the surrounding community reacted with hostility and racism. Fake “No Trespassing” signs were placed around the Bruce’s Beach property cutting off the resort guests from water access, swimmers and Bruce’s Beach patrons were repeatedly harassed, and many white residents began pressuring the local government to “do something” about this flourishing Black business. At the same time, six other Black families purchased plots of land nearby Bruce’s Beach and built their homes there, establishing the beginning of a modest and diverse community in Manhattan Beach.

In 1924, prompted by a petition from local white real estate agents and other civic

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leaders, the Manhattan Beach City Council voted to condemn Bruce's Beach and the surrounding land through eminent domain under the ostensible purpose of building a park. It is well documented that the real reason behind the eminent domain process was racially motivated with the intention of bringing an end to the successful Black business in the predominantly white community. Twenty years later, one of the Manhattan Beach City Councilmembers who voted for the condemnation, Frank Doherty, wrote an article for the Redondo Reflex newspaper reflecting on the motivation behind the eminent domain process: "We thought that the Negro problem was going to stop our progress... We had to acquire these two blocks to solve the problem, so we voted to condemn them and make a city park there. We had to protect ourselves. Our attorney advised members of the council never to admit the real purpose and establishment of the park, especially during the council meetings." At the time that the Council voted to condemn the land, it also put new laws on the books that prohibited resort-type businesses in that area, effectively prohibiting the Bruce family from purchasing other beachfront property for a resort, so the condemnation of their property also meant the de facto end of the Bruce's Beach resort, which was exactly the goal of the City Council.

Charles and Willa Bruce fought the condemnation of their property in court along with the other Black families whose adjacent land was condemned. In 1929, the court awarded their property to the City of Manhattan Beach through eminent domain. The Bruce family moved out of Manhattan Beach, and the City immediately demolished the Bruce's Beach resort. No park was built, and the land sat empty for decades. The City of Manhattan Beach finally built a park in 1956 on the land behind the Bruce's Beach resort, nearly 30 years after the land was acquired. Through a series of land transfers between the City of Manhattan Beach, State of California, and County of Los Angeles (County), the County acquired the land that was originally owned by Charles and Willa

Bruce in 1995. As a result, the County has the opportunity to rectify the historic injustice that was done to the Bruce family by returning the ownership of the land to its rightful owners, the descendants of Charles and Willa Bruce.

In an act of racism motivated by the desire to drive out a successful Black business, the City of Manhattan Beach seized Bruce's Beach from Charles and Willa Bruce under the false pretense of building a park, not only forcing them to leave Manhattan Beach but also depriving their descendants of access to generational wealth.

The County is now in the position to right this wrong by returning the land to the living descendants of the Bruce family. The 6,999 square feet beachfront property that originally belonged to Charles and Willa Bruce sits in between the public beach and the Manhattan Beach City park that was finally built in 1956. The Los Angeles County Lifeguard Administration Building currently sits at the site that the Bruce's Beach resort once stood a century ago. To the left and right of the Lifeguard Building are rows and rows of private residences. While we cannot change the past, we can act now in the present to right this historic wrong by returning the land that was unjustly taken from the Bruce family so that the descendants of Charles and Willa Bruce have the opportunity to participate in the American Dream that their great grandparents sought out a century ago.

WE, THEREFORE MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Chief Executive Officer, County Counsel, and the Executive Director of Racial Equity, in consultation with the Los Angeles County Fire Department, to report back in 60 days with a plan that includes, at a minimum, recommendations regarding:

1. A proposed timeline and steps required to transfer the parcels of land originally owned by the Bruce family or equivalent parcels in the portion of land within Manhattan State Beach known as "Peck's Manhattan Beach Tract Block 5" (commonly referred to as "Bruce's Beach") to the descendants of Charles and Willa

Bruce;

2. Options to address property tax issues associated with transfer of the property;
3. Continued County occupancy of the site following transfer, or a plan to relocate County facilities; and
4. Appropriate safeguards to ensure that the property is transferred to descendants of the Bruce family, including an opportunity for descendants to come forward and the possibility of naming a third-party trustee to oversee claims of ownership in the property, restoration of title, and other necessary procedural steps.

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