

CSAC Challenge Awards 2022 - Return of Bruce's Beach

Overview: Los Angeles County (County) Chief Executive Office's Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiative (ARDI), in collaboration with County Counsel, facilitated the County Board of Supervisors' (Board) directive to return property, known as Bruce's Beach, to the direct descendants of Charles and Willa Bruce to rectify an historic injustice.

Challenge: In the 1920s, Charles and Willa Bruce owned and operated a successful seaside resort in the City of Manhattan Beach (City) that welcomed Black beachgoers from all over Los Angeles. The City wrongfully condemned the Bruces' property in a racially motivated attempt to drive out the Bruces' successful Black business, its patrons, and other Black property owners in the area.

In 1948, long after the City condemned Bruce's Beach under the ostensible purpose of building a park, the City transferred the vacant land to the State of California (State). The State, in turn, transferred the property to the County in 1995, as a part of a larger transfer of eight State beaches to the County. A County Lifeguard Administration Facility currently occupies the property.

The County team had to overcome the following to accomplish the Board's objective of returning Bruce's Beach: (1) removing statutory deed restrictions imposed by the State prohibiting the property's transfer and restricting its use; (2) articulating the public purposes behind the return of the property; (3) ensuring that the return would not place undue burdens on the descendants, such tax impacts; (4) confirming the identity of the direct descendants; (5) minimizing impacts to County operations; (5) establishing a workable precedent to address similar injustices.

Solution: The County team created a roadmap for returning Bruce's Beach to the Bruce family to address each of the above challenges. The County sponsored legislation, Senate Bill (SB) 796, to remove the State restrictions on the transfer of Bruce's Beach. SB 796 also directed that the property taxes upon transfer would be set based on the 1975 lien date, and exempted the transfer from State income taxes. Most importantly, SB 796 set out the public purposes motivating the Board's determination to return Bruce's Beach to the Bruce family, namely, that it is the government's responsibility to remedy, prohibit and eliminate racial discrimination in all forms. Both

houses of the State Legislature unanimously approved SB 796, and Governor Newsom signed SB 796 at Bruce's Beach on September 30, 2021.

The County team also conducted a thorough and transparent legal heir determination process to confirm the Bruces' direct descendants, assessed the ongoing operational needs of the County Lifeguards, and successfully defended the proposed transfer from a legal challenge.

ARDI continues to host a Bruce's Beach webpage to ensure that the public is informed and aware of the history of Bruce's Beach and efforts to return the property to the Bruce family.

Innovation: To our knowledge, this is the first time a local government has returned private property wrongfully taken because of racial animus to the rightful owners' descendants. The County team had to navigate novel constitutional, legislative, real estate, tax, and heirship issues in order to accomplish the return of Bruce's Beach.

Results: The County team ultimately negotiated a transfer agreement and leaseback of the property with an option to purchase, which our Board approved on June 28, 2022. The County returned Bruce's Beach to the Bruce family on July 15, 2022.

Replicability: Although the return of Bruce's Beach to the Bruce family had some unique challenges, the approach taken by the County will inform future County decision-making with respect to redressing historic racial injustices and we hope will become a model for other jurisdictions in California and across the nation to follow.

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Additional Materials: [Bruce's Beach \(lacounty.gov\)](#)