



Board of Directors
East Bay Regional Park District
2950 Peralta Oaks Court
Oakland, CA 94605

February 3, 2021

**Re: Bay Area Black Community Naming Recommendation:
Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50**

Dear Esteemed EBRPD Board of Directors,

Thank you for your good work caring for our regional parklands. We know you are aware heroes define our ideals and aspirations and recognizing our nation's heroes, of all races, is key to building inclusive, equitable, and productive communities. Although the names on our regional public lands should reflect the values of society, they often just reflect the values of those who are in power. This perpetually leaves people of color without acknowledgement of their representative heroes and diminishes the significant sacrifices and contributions people of color have made to our region.

The East Bay Area is severely lacking in Black representation in regional park names. There are currently zero regional parks in Contra Costa County named to honor Black culture or history. This lack of representation has a detrimental effect on self-esteem and pride within our communities and results in many underserved citizens feeling uninvited and unwelcome in our public parklands.

Fortunately, there is now a unique opportunity to honor Black history on the land where so many Black Americans died serving our country at Port Chicago Naval Magazine. This former military base, located in Contra Costa County, is the site of the Port Chicago disaster, the World War II explosion that killed 320 sailors, officers, and civilians. In the aftermath, many of the surviving Black sailors were ordered to resume handling the same dangerous munitions that caused the explosion. Under the threat of a court martial, ultimately only fifty sailors stood in protest of an order that endangered their lives. NAACP's Thurgood Marshall tirelessly worked to defend the fifty servicemen – known as the Port Chicago 50 – and advocated to end the vicious policy of segregation that contributed to the deaths of the 320 men. Together these civil rights pioneers were instrumental in desegregating our U.S. Armed Forces, a pivotal step in the journey to national integration.

At this future park, we can pay tribute to these stories to cultivate pride and a sense of self-esteem in our underserved communities while providing a public space where everyone can feel at home in nature. The Park District's unique opportunity is perhaps summed up best by U.S. Congressman Mark DeSaulnier, who said:

"This [park] is a wonderful opportunity for the Bay Area to tell an amazing American story; both its tragedy and its failure but also of the liberating, forceful individuals who decided this wasn't good enough – that we had to reconcile our weaknesses and our prejudice with what we hope for in the future."

In the interest of honoring the national heroes and history of Port Chicago Naval Magazine, a coalition including Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial, NAACP East County, United Veterans Council, and Citizens for Historical Equity has united to unanimously recommend Concord Hills Regional Park be named:

Thurgood Marshall Regional Park - Home of the Port Chicago 50

This park name is supported by a petition of over 880 citizens and has been endorsed by regional organizations, churches, museums, veterans, and historians. The Black Employee Collective of the East Bay Regional Park District, AFSCME Local 2428, Black Cultural Zone, Native American Veterans Association, Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center, and authors Robert L. Allen (*The Port Chicago Mutiny*) and Steve Sheinkin (*The Port Chicago 50*) are just a few of the many supporters of this proposed park name.

The Port Chicago 50 – whose civil rights protest pre-dates Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott – should be revered for courageously standing up for equality. Honoring the Port Chicago 50 will give voice to the patriots who lost their lives in the explosion and bring renewed context to enhance and serve their legacy. The explosion that cost these men their lives was a catalyst for a regional civil rights movement that echoed throughout the halls of the White House and forever changed this country for the better. That's a momentous legacy we cannot allow to be forgotten.

Supreme Court Justice and NAACP Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall represents the highest ideals of our country and is a shining symbol of equality and justice. As a champion of civil rights, he advocated for environmental, racial, and social justice including Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. These themes resonate throughout the many stories that will be interpreted at the future visitor center. Marshall is a hero and inspiration for future generations.

The enthusiasm and support for this naming recommendation continues to grow. As recently-retired Park District GM Robert Doyle said, "This story is not a Contra Costa story, it is a national story [and] I don't know anywhere in the District where we've had an issue of a national scale... This is probably one of the most important decisions in the Park District's history."

Recognizing the sacrifices and contributions of people of color in this park name, by naming the park after Black patriots, will serve as a beacon to the Bay Area and the entire country that the East Bay Regional Park District values and welcomes Black

visitors and honors our veterans and the cultural stories of the lands.

For these reasons, we respectfully ask the East Bay Regional Park District to declare Concord Hills Regional Park be named:

Thurgood Marshall Regional Park - Home of the Port Chicago 50.

Signed,

Citizens for Historical Equity

United Veterans Council of Pittsburgh, CA

Friends of Port Chicago
National Memorial

National Association for the Advancement
of Colored People (NAACP) East County



Cc:

NPS Superintendent of Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial
EBRPD General Manager
EBRPD Deputy General Manager
EBRPD AGM of Acquisition & Stewardship Division
EBRPD Planning Department
EBRPD Black Employee Collective