

July 30, 2020

TO: Honorable Members of the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo

Dave Pine, District 1

Carole Groom, District 2

Don Horsley, District 3

Warren Slocum, District 4

David Canepa, District 5

FROM: Heather Green, District 2, Chair, San Mateo County Parks Commission
[+ other Commissioners if indicated at Commission]

RE: San Mateo County's reliance on California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Work Crews for fire fuel reduction work

Dear Supervisors,

It is an honor and a privilege to serve on the Parks Commission and support all the tremendous work the Parks Department delivers for San Mateo County. Since joining the Commission more than a year ago, I have been consistently impressed with Department staff and leadership, and I am confident our future is bright.

There is a matter that has come before the Parks Commission, however, that demands a small but monumental change in the Department's budget: our reliance on prison labor for fire hazard mitigation work. As a matter of regular practice and not unlike other counties, **San Mateo County makes use of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) prisoners' labor as part of our Cal Fire projects to clear brush and reduce wildfire risk. This practice is a violation of our values as a community of anti-racism, respect for labor, and justice for all, and it must stop.**

Didn't slavery end long ago? Not completely. While the 13th Amendment eliminated slavery and forced servitude, it also made an exception for slavery and forced servitude imposed for the punishment of a crime. This carve-out directly incentivized the arrest of Black people and laid the foundation for the racist imbalances that persist in our criminal justice system today. Our ongoing benefit from this exception implicates present-day San Mateo County in this terrible legacy.

I respectfully request that the Board consider a budget amendment in September to appropriate funds to end this shameful practice and pay a decent wage for the labor we use. I have discussed this issue with Parks Director Nicholas Calderon to gain an understanding of the resources required to deliver San Mateo's essential fuel reduction work another way:

- In FY2019-20, CDCR work crews provided 40 work days for the department.

- The County pays \$250 per work day for a crew of 9-12 people. That daily charge goes to the fuel for the bus to transport the crew, the saw fuel, chains and parts, and tools for the bus. That total cost (excluding staff time) is \$10,000.
- Director Calderon provided an estimate of between \$1,600 and \$3,000 per work day if the Department were to hire a private contractor to conduct the same work. For 40 days of contractor work, **it would cost between \$64,000 and \$120,000.**

Supporting prisoner reentry training is important to break the cycle of incarceration. We need not abandon that support. We should simply commit to pay for the work we receive in accordance with County wage requirements.

Of course, I understand we are in the midst of a pandemic, and budgets are tight for all departments. I know that everyone is being asked to make cuts and show savings so we can deal with our health emergency. Still, and urgently, we must do the right thing. **The relatively small amount of money it would take to rectify this situation and be able to say, "San Mateo is no place for slave labor," is worth it.**

The 13th Amendment says slavery is okay if you've been convicted of a crime. But slavery is never okay. Unpaid labor is never okay. Even if the programs are voluntary, even if they have good sides, even if prisoners want to join them because it gets them out of their cells, the work is still unpaid labor, and it is wrong, especially when we know the overall system is structurally biased.

Most basically, our practice of using prison labor cuts against our character. We can do better, and it wouldn't even be terribly expensive.

I hope that you will find \$100,000 in the current budget and ongoing to end San Mateo County's reliance on unpaid prison labor for our fire fuel reduction work.

Thank you.