

Cheryl Davila
Councilmember
District 2

CONSENT CALENDAR
September 15, 2020

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Councilmember Cheryl Davila

Subject: Letter to East Bay Regional Park District supporting renaming Vollmer Peak

RECOMMENDATION

Send the attached letter to the East Bay Regional Park District Board of Directors supporting renaming Vollmer Peak.

BACKGROUND

The residents of Berkeley have demonstrated unprecedented engagement in discussions of policing and community safety in the past several months. The overwhelming majority of those residents commenting in Berkeley City Council meetings called for substantially defunding the Berkeley Police Department and many called for a vote of no confidence in Chief Greenwood, following his June 9th comments¹ about resorting to shooting people for crowd control, where tear gas is banned.

As the city takes the time to deeply consider the role of police in public safety and figure out the best way to invest in community safety resources, we must also consider the history of policing in Berkeley. Berkeley's first police chief, August Vollmer, has been called the "father of American policing," and has been widely celebrated for his innovations in policing. He was widely influential in the early twentieth century, traveling around the country, helping establish other police departments and criminology schools².

While Vollmer was beloved by many and instituted many reforms that were seen as progressive at the time, his innovations were foundational for institutionalizing the systemic racial bias in policing that is evident in Berkeley Police Department in recent years. Just as it has become clear that artificial intelligence programs have racist outputs due to their biased inputs,³ Vollmer's own biases have been programmed into the operations of the Berkeley Police Department since its inception. Although Vollmer was considered progressive for hiring Black officers, it is clear that he personally upheld White Supremacy and further codified it in his

¹ <https://www.berkeleyside.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Greenwood-City-Council-Transcript.pdf>

² https://www.cityofberkeley.info/Police/Home/History_The_Earliest_Years_1905-1925.aspx
<https://www.dailycal.org/2020/06/09/ucb-role-in-shaping-modern-police/>
<https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2017/04/20/berkeley-a-look-back-free-talk-looks-at-citys-groundbreaking-first-police-chief/>

³ <https://thenextweb.com/neural/2020/06/24/stop-calling-it-bias-ai-is-racist/>

esteemed criminology school. Vollmer was a member of multiple eugenics societies and his proposed curriculum⁴ for his criminology school included units on Racial types, Race degeneration, Eugenics, and Hereditary crime and criminal tendencies.

After Vollmer passed away in the 1950s, the highest point in the Berkeley and Oakland hills (elevation 1905 ft) was renamed from Bald Peak to Vollmer peak in his honor. Due to his commitment to eugenics and role in shaping the Berkeley Police Department, which does not serve all members of our community, it is advisable to rename the peak. Vollmer peak is a popular hiking and cycling destination; upholding this name is a covert signal that not all are welcome to enjoy the East Bay Regional Parks.

In a preliminary survey of East Bay Regional Park stakeholders, 88% of respondents supported renaming Vollmer Peak. When presented with a choice between renaming the peak and keeping the name and educating the public about Vollmer, 87% of respondents said that we should rename the peak. Of the 125 survey respondents, 73 were from Berkeley, 20 from Oakland, and the majority of the others from surrounding areas.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, the East Bay Regional Park District released a statement committing to "being part of the necessary change to realize a just society" and welcoming ideas to realize their goal of making their parks accessible, safe, and welcoming for all.⁵ Pursuant to this commitment, we ask the East Bay Regional Park District to rename Vollmer Peak and engage the community through a formal survey to determine whether there are other landmarks that should be renamed and to gather suggestions for how they can make the parks more inclusive for all residents of the East Bay.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Protecting our communities during this climate and health crisis is an act of environmental sustainability.

CONTACT PERSONS

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ATTACHMENTS:

1. Letter to East Bay Regional Park Board of Directors supporting the renaming of Vollmer Peak and initiation of a process to community engagement to make the parks more inclusive

REFERENCES:

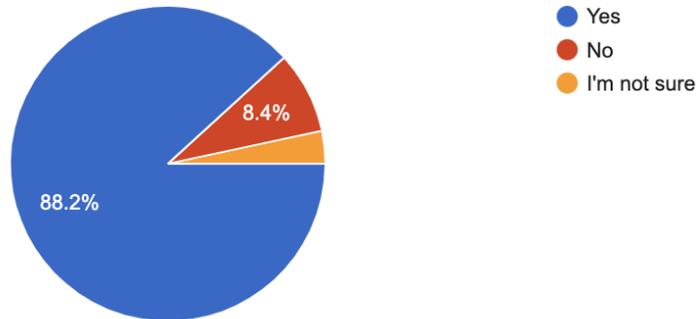
1. Survey Results:

⁴ <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1505&context=jclc>

⁵ <https://www.ebparks.org/civica/press/display.asp?layout=11&Entry=581>

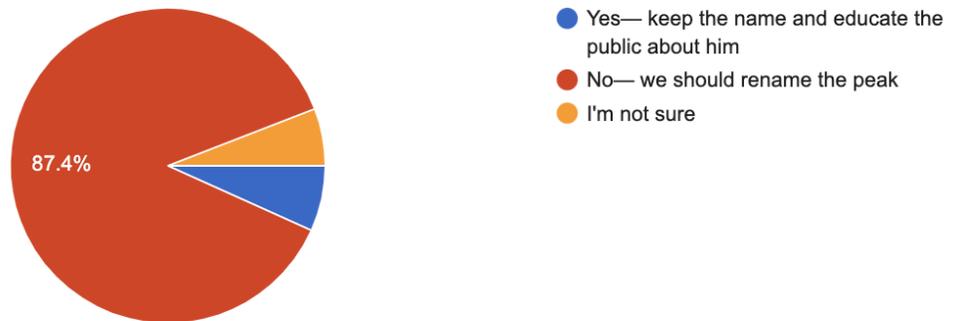
I think Vollmer Peak should be renamed

119 responses



I think we should keep Vollmer's name and educate the public about him

119 responses



Dear East Bay Regional Park Board of Directors,

Thank you for your leadership in keeping the parks open during the COVID-19 pandemic so that our community can safely enjoy the outdoors.

With regard to our community's safety, we commend your June 16th [Resolution](#) Denouncing Racism and Standing in Solidarity with Black Americans. In keeping with your stated *commitment to learning and changing to ensure our parks and trails are safe and welcoming to East Bay communities and all who choose to visit*, we recommend that you take action to rename landmarks whose namesakes have racist connotations or are named after individuals who perpetuated racism in their lifetime. Although historic persons may have been chosen as namesakes for our parks' landmarks due to their popularity and service to the community, keeping their names attached to our landmarks signals to our Black, indigenous, and community members of color that they are not welcome.

It has come to our attention that August Vollmer, who was Berkeley's widely celebrated first police chief, perpetuated racism through his participation in eugenics societies and the inclusion of eugenics and other racist philosophies in his criminology school's curriculum. A preliminary survey of members of our community suggested that a large percentage of stakeholders surveyed support renaming Vollmer Peak. In addition, most respondents felt that it was important to rename the peak, rather than simply educate the community about Vollmer.

The Berkeley City Council urges you to take the following actions in order to follow through with your commitment to making the parks more inclusive:

- 1) Rename Vollmer Peak.
- 2) Initiate a formalized process of community engagement that prioritizes the historically excluded voices Black, indigenous, and community members of color to determine what other landmarks should be renamed and what other actions beyond renaming landmarks would make the parks more welcoming for all community members.

Sincerely,

Berkeley City Council