

Submitter: John Bethencourt

On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans

Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB2995

Representative Nelson's bill to study and propose reparations is a crucial first step in beginning to properly address the many forms of oppression African-American people have been subjected to over nearly two centuries in what is now the state of Oregon. Opponents of this bill claim it is unnecessary because the state never permitted the slave trade. These claims reveal tremendous ignorance of Oregon's uniquely white supremacist history and illustrate the need for broad public education on the subject, one of the goals of this important bill.

To list some examples of the ways that African-American people have been systematically marginalized and suppressed, beginning in 1844, all Black people were explicitly prohibited by law from living in the territory of Oregon, under penalty of flogging and forced labor (that is to say, slavery by another name). When Oregon became a state in 1859, it was the only state in the union with such exclusion laws, and soon introduced additional laws banning Black ownership of property in the state. These laws remained on the books until 1926, when they were repealed by a ballot initiation which passed with 63% of the vote. The fact that 37% of voters still supported these prohibitions less than a century ago is telling. After the repeal of the exclusion laws, housing covenants continued to ban African-American residents from living in the most desirable neighborhoods until they were overturned federally in 1968. In the 1980s, officers from the Portland Police Bureau terrorized and threatened African-American residents by placing dead animals outside Black-owned businesses, prompting an FBI investigation.

Those are just some of the ways African-American people in Oregon have suffered from racist laws and policing. I've said nothing of the innumerable forms of everyday, informal racism which exist outside the legal system. The very least this state can do is begin to study and explore how we can compensate African-American people living in Oregon today for the effects of present-day racist acts as well as the aftereffects of the explicitly racist policies that were in place for generations.