

OPINION

The NIMBYs of Malibu

When its hills are ablaze again, will residents regret blocking a fire camp staffed by prison inmates?

LOS ANGELES County Fire Department officials were considering using a station in Malibu as a temporary replacement for a conservation camp on Mt. Gleason that was destroyed last summer by the devastating Station fire. But when residents of the beachfront city realized that the camp would be staffed by prison inmates, they began organizing to stop it.

They succeeded Wednesday, when Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman announced that he would look elsewhere.

California's conservation camps are one of the very few bright spots in a dysfunctional state corrections system, one of those rare government programs from which everybody benefits — taxpayers, hillside dwellers and prisoners alike. Under the program, minimum-security inmates who have no history of violent crime can qualify to serve at fire stations, where they're overseen by prison guards and county firefighters. The inmates are paid about \$1 an hour and can earn two days off their sentences for every day served; these prisoners have fought many of the state's biggest wildfires and saved lives and property along the way, at a fraction of the taxpayer cost of regular firefighters. Some inmates

benefit from the training and get jobs as firefighters upon their release.

Malibu's successful NIMBY campaign makes it tempting to suggest that the next time the historically fire-prone city goes up in flames, we should let it burn. Of course, that won't and shouldn't happen; not all coast dwellers are as irresponsible as the ones who halted the fire camp. But it does show how difficult it might prove for the state to implement its plan to build community detention centers.

In 2007, the Legislature approved \$7.4 billion in bonds to add 53,000 prison and jail beds to cope with an overcrowding and healthcare crisis. Some of that money will be spent on 500-bed reentry facilities throughout the state, where inmates nearing the end of their terms will be sent. The hope is that these centers will reduce recidivism by helping prisoners make the transition from institutional life to the real world. We've been skeptical of this plan from the beginning, preferring strategies to reduce the inmate population over a prison construction program, but there's little question that these reentry centers would provide prisoners with a better chance to go straight than they have now.

A few far-flung communities have already approved reentry centers, but none have been proposed yet for urban areas. If other cities follow the lead of Malibu — too hysterical to accept felons in the neighborhood even when they're protecting lives and homes — it could be an uphill fight for the program.

say: Welcome to the club.

RUDI LOGG
West Hollywood

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I was struck by the statement of Courage Campaign Chairman Rick Jacobs: "The five conservative justices are enabling Prop. 8 supporters to mask their radical views."

Radical? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word "radical" as "tending or disposed to make extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions or institutions."

So who is radical here: those who seek to change a tradition that is thousands of years old, or those who want to preserve it?

On both sides, we need to be careful with words.

VLADIMIR BOGOROV
Van Nuys

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Re "Expert: Gay, straight couples are 'the same,'" Jan. 14

I was intrigued by this report on the Proposition 8 trial. But in truth the findings of the expert are really not relevant.

Let's say there is indisputable proof that gay couples are happier, healthier, more monogamous and fertile — it's all irrelevant.

Same-gender marriage should be made legal simply because it's the moral and ethical thing to do.

RABBI ZACH SHAPIRO
Los Angeles

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Re "The marriage test," Editorial, Jan. 15

The Times gets a round of applause from this woman. There are no criteria proposed in any other arena of marriage. Why should gays and lesbians be singled out? How can we look at any mar



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