Economic Development on MLK Streets

The Business of Street Naming
When African Americans seek to rename major thoroughfares, they often encounter harsh opposition from business owners. Entrepreneurs frequently cite the financial burden of changing their address on stationary, advertising, and billing statements. Some opponents, such as in Zephyrhills, FL, where city officials voted to dedicate rather than rename a street for King in 2004, express fear that property values will drop on a MLK street. However, there is no evidence to suggest that street naming is necessarily bad for business. At the national level, the sales productivity of commercial establishments with a King address are similar to those on streets with other prominent names such as Main, Market, and John F. Kennedy. Rather than causing poverty, King’s name is sometimes placed in areas that are already blighted. Recognizing the economic challenges that face people living on these streets, several cities are engaged in redevelopment efforts, such as Savannah, GA, Milwaukee, WI, Seattle, WA, Indianapolis, IN, and Miami, FL.

Almost 11,000 non-residential establishments in the U.S. have a Martin Luther King, Jr. address.

A Complex Picture
The economically depressed condition of some Martin Luther King, Jr. streets has led to a stereotypical belief that all of them are like this. In reality, the picture is more complex. Seventy-four percent of all MLK streets have at least one non-residential establishment. King streets represent areas with just a few enterprises to commercial districts with hundreds of businesses. King’s namesake in Tampa, FL has the largest number of non-residential establishments (over 500), followed by Los Angeles, CA, Atlanta, GA, Portland, OR, and Washington, DC.

The size of the circles on the map are proportional to the number of non-residential establishments in each city.

Additional Reading
*Toward, Jonathan, 2003, Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America’s Main Street. New York: Random House, 201 pp. (Copyright Newsweek News Service).*


A Street Fit For A King

Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr. Along America’s Roadways

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Street Naming: A National and Local Movement
The renaming of streets is one of the most widespread ways in which communities remember Martin Luther King, Jr. Over 730 places in 59 states and the District of Columbia have named a street in his honor. Seventy percent of places with a MLK street are concentrated in seven southern states (GA, MS, SC, TX, FL, LA, AL, NC). This is not surprising given that so many civil rights organizations, campaigns, and leaders, including King himself, originated in the region. Although a nation-wide movement, street naming is proposed by local activists, usually African American, and decided by city and county governments. Each community faces the task of interpreting the meaning of King’s legacy and selecting a street that is most fit or appropriate for remembering the civil rights leader.

King: A Commemorative Icon
In 1983, the U.S. government declared King’s birthday a federal holiday, the first such tribute to an African American. Every third Monday in January, communities honor his memory with marches, educational forums, community service projects, and often parades. Below an image of King shown on the back of a sanitation truck during a holiday parade in Belle Glade, FL. King not only called for racial equality and nonviolence but also economic justice. He led him to advocate for striking sanitation workers in Memphis, TN, where he was assassinated in 1968.

The Geography of MLK Streets
MLK streets are found in a variety of places, from large cities such as Chicago, which likely named the nation’s first street for King, to small towns like Cuba, AL (pop., 363). Over 50% of MLK streets are in places with less than 10,000 people.

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