

A Sign of Changing Times: A Street-Renaming Lesson from Chapel Hill, North Carolina

by **Derek Alderman**

A common yet contentious issue that local government managers and elected officials might confront during the course of their careers is the renaming of a street after slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Naming streets for King is part of a movement to recognize the often neglected historical achievements of African Americans. Although this commemoration occurs most often in the southeastern states, it represents a national movement.

By 2003, at least 730 streets in 39 states and the District of Columbia had been named or re-named for King (Figure 1). Streets named for King are found across the urban hierarchy, from metropolises such as New York, Los Angeles, and Houston to hamlets such as Cuba, Alabama, and Pawley's Island, South Carolina.

The work of naming streets for Martin Luther King often takes place through highly public debate and controversy, particularly when African Americans seek to rename a major thoroughfare that cuts across business districts and through neighborhoods of various racial and ethnic groups.

How a community handles the renaming of a street after a civil rights icon may very well indicate how that same community treats its minority residents in general and how race relations will be perceived in the future.

Also pertinent are discussions of government's responsibility to private businesses and residences situated on public streets and thoroughfares. Residents and business owners fronting a particular street do not have a proprietary interest in whether the road is renamed; however, it is important to recognize that these stakeholders do incur much, but not all, of the cost and inconvenience of an address change.

In addition, some business and property owners have expressed anxiety and consternation over seeing their street's identity changed, particularly when the current road name has a long history within the community.

Local governments have developed some creative strategies for mitigating

the economic aspects of an address change. Some communities phase in the street renaming over several months or even a few years to allow for old inventories of labels, stationery, and invoices to be used. Some cities, like Clearwater, Florida, have even allowed a road to carry two offi-

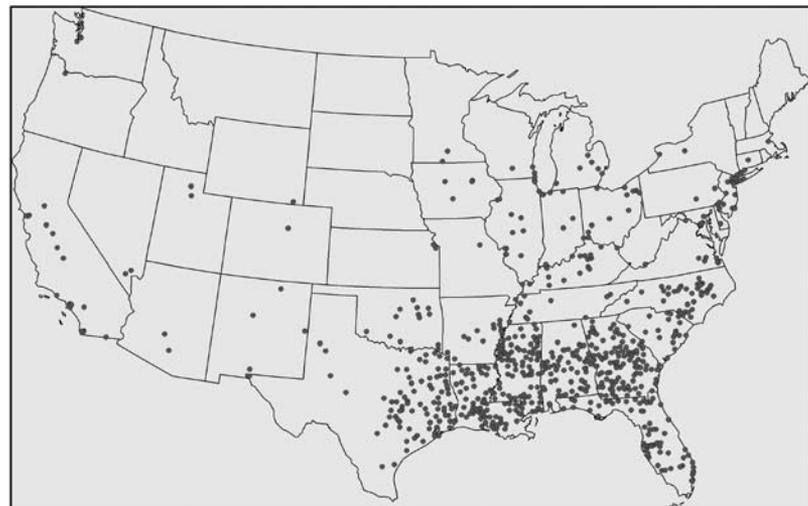


Figure 1. Places with a Martin Luther King Street, 2003.



Figure 2:
MLK Street
Sign in
Chapel Hill,
North
Carolina.

cial names—the old and the new—until the full renaming takes effect. More difficult for managers is addressing the deeper psychological and social impact that comes with the removal and replacing of one's address.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, offers a potentially useful lesson on how to rename a road for King while not completely erasing a street's previous identity. In 2005, after intense public opposition from residential and commercial interests, who cited a strong

belief that the street's original name was a key part of their heritage, the city proceeded to rename Airport Road.

The Airport Road controversy prompted Chapel Hill's city council to organize a special committee to study the issue. The committee, composed of a cross section of stakeholders, including but not limited to property owners on the street, recommended that Airport Road be renamed but charged the city to design a compromise street sign (Figure 2).

The special signage used in Chapel Hill clearly indicates that Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard is the street's name, while the sign also designates it as "Historic Airport Road." Such a design has the advantage of minimizing initial confusion from the name change, particularly for visitors who return after the change is implemented. More important, the sign gives authority and visibility to the traditional historical identity of a street, even as local leaders are called upon to commemorate the civil rights movement.

The Chapel Hill case illustrates how our streets can be used to preserve the memory of local landmarks as well as serve as a "sign of the changing times." Other communities might consider adopting such a design, not only when asked to memorialize King but when faced with any street renaming request.

—Derek Alderman, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
 East Carolina University,
 Greenville, North Carolina
 aldermand@ecu.edu

and
 Preston Mitchell
 Town Manager

Nashville, North Carolina
 pwm0809@yahoo.com

Sixth Annual Swimming Pool Issue

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If you serve in a community that provides a public pool for its citizens that has not already been featured in the magazine—or has been updated since it was featured—and if the pool is distinctive in style, structure, operation, location, cost, or other management aspect, share this information in *PM*.

Send a 250- to 500-word description telling why the pool is distinctive to *PM* Editor, ICMA, 777 N. Capitol Street, N.E., Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 2002-4201; e-mail is preferred, at bpayne@icma.org. Electronic photo files in high-resolution PDF format are welcome. The deadline for submitting article copy is September 14, 2007.

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