

A Road

The challenges of naming streets for Martin Luther King, Jr.

At first glance, commemorative street-naming may appear to be a minor concern given the wide range of issues that planners and public managers must face every day. Yet it is a practice of increasing importance to racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. as they seek ways to recognize their past achievements and struggles and, in turn, to establish their current legitimacy.

The naming of streets for slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. is the most widespread and controversial example of this trend. By 2003, at least 730 streets in 39 states and the District of Columbia had been named, or renamed, for King. Naming these streets has often involved public debate and controversy, and it has exposed local racial and political tensions. Discussions have led to shouting matches at government meetings, boycotts of businesses, protest marches, petition drives, court appeals, the vandalizing of roads, and activists chaining themselves to street signs.

Much of the contentiousness arises when African Americans propose to rename a thoroughfare that cuts across business districts and racial groups. Local governments are often reluctant to approve the renaming, citing the cost of an address change and opposition from potentially affected businesses and residences. Although King's name can be found on some

thoroughfares, this public conflict has kept most of the renamed streets confined to majority black neighborhoods. For many African Americans, honoring King along America's roadways has ironically become a reminder of continued inequality rather than the dream of integration and social justice.

Point of intervention

In evaluating street naming proposals, planners are asked to consider government's responsibility to private property owners while also considering and protecting minority rights in a majority rule system.

How a community handles the seemingly unproblematic issue of naming a street after

an important civil rights figure may very well indicate how that community treats its African American residents in general and how race relations will be perceived in the future.

In finding an appropriate way to honor King on America's streets, communities have pursued several strategies that we identify and analyze here.

Rename a section of the street

One of the most common strategies used to honor King has been to place his name on a street or a segment of a street located primarily within the African American community. This approach has the advantage of limiting opposition from white citizens. Whites seldom resist



Frank Alderman

Bumpy

By Derek H. Alderman, Steve Spina, and Preston Mitchell



street naming efforts as long as they do not violate traditional racial boundaries in the city (meaning they do not reach beyond the “black” areas of town).

Elected officials also find it relatively easy to rename an African American street because support for such proposals is strongest in the black community. Indeed, some African American activists see street renaming as a way to educate themselves and others about their own heritage and to develop a sense of empowerment and cultural worth.

When campaigning to have a street renamed in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, the director of the city’s neighborhood community development corporation connected King’s legacy with ongoing attempts to revitalize African American business and residential areas. In her words, “Being small and having traffic lights and stop signs doesn’t make it less worthy to be named Martin Luther King Drive. . . . Martin Luther King didn’t work along the freeway. He worked in communities.”

Limiting the commemoration of Martin Luther King to black neighborhoods may be a comfortable proposition for whites and even some African Americans. However, in our opinion, the strategy runs the risk of reinforcing patterns of inequality and maintaining the

widespread public perception that King was a black leader whose teachings and achievements are irrelevant to the wider society. The resulting impression is that African Americans are racial outsiders and that major portions of the larger community are reserved for whites and white historical figures.

In addition, this strategy often leads to the renaming of segments of streets rather than entire roads, which may contribute to confusion in traffic navigation as well as political discontent and debate.

Black leaders are increasingly demanding that local governments revisit the street-renaming issue and that King’s name be moved to more prominent streets or extended for the entire length of streets, often into white neighborhoods.

Greenville, North Carolina, changed West Fifth Street to Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive in 1998. Originally African American leaders wanted all of Fifth Street renamed—not just part of it—but residents and business owners on the eastern end strongly opposed the proposal. King Drive marks an area that is predominantly black, whereas East Fifth is mostly white. African American leaders have expressed deep frustration over the marginalization of the civil rights leader but have been unsuccessful in renaming

the rest of Fifth Street. In the words of one elected black official, “A whole man deserves a whole street.”

The controversy reached such a pitch that white municipal leaders voted last February to rename the city’s bypass for King and revert the existing King Drive back to West Fifth Street, a decision that prompted protests by African American leaders and others.

Rename a major thoroughfare

African Americans often interpret the renaming of a major road as an indication of the city’s commitment to recognizing King’s legacy. By asking many residents and business owners to change their mailing address, proponents seek to make King’s memory visible and personal to a larger cross section of the public.

Opponents often say an address change is an insurmountable financial inconvenience, but anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. In 2004, one year after the Eugene, Oregon, city council renamed Centennial Boulevard for King, business representatives on the street reported that the economic impact of the address change was negligible. A similar situation occurred in New Bern, North Carolina, where city officials gave business owners a year to make adjustments before officially renaming Clarendon Boulevard.

King's namesake in New Bern is a numbered U.S. highway and the location of over 200 businesses, including a shopping mall, a Wal-Mart, and car dealerships.

Further, renaming a racially diverse thoroughfare may have social and political benefits that can outweigh financial considerations. In connecting black and white communities, a community shows it **understands the integration that King fought to achieve**. Such a step may send a **powerful message about the sensitivity of city leaders to the needs of black citizens**, and that in turn may lead to discussion of seemingly more important issues.

Still, it can be difficult and time consuming to build cross-racial support for such a proposal. In many cases, city officials have taken months or even years to **phase in a new street name**. Bowing to **businesses interests**, city officials in St. Petersburg, Florida, allowed a road to carry two **official names temporarily**—Martin Luther King, Jr. Street and Ninth Street. The two names coexisted for 15 years until the local chapters of the NAACP and Southern Christian Leadership Conference forced the city to drop Ninth Street signs in 2002.

Some cities are considering dual named streets as a permanent solution. This past summer, local officials in Covington, Kentucky ended an almost 20-year debate by honoring King with a major road, but only after adding the **civil rights leader's name to 12th Street** so that property owners would not incur the cost of losing their numerical address.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, dealt with a different issue: the loss of local tradition. In 2005, a coalition of African American and white leaders succeeded in having Airport Road, a thoroughfare, renamed for Martin Luther King, Jr. Intense public opposition came from residential and commercial interests on the street, who said that the road's long-standing name was a key part of their heritage. The solution: special signage that indicates King is the official street name while also designating the road as "Historic Airport Road."

Finally, there is the larger agenda: white concern about the perceived stigma of **living and working on King Street**. There is a **false notion that all King streets are blighted and depressed**. In fact, many have annual sales comparable to the national average for all **U.S. streets**, and several King streets are **undergoing revitalization**, including those in Miami, Savannah, Milwaukee, Seattle, and Portland.

Overall, a primary issue for planners is determining whether a given **strategy should be pursued** because it is what the black community wants or because it is simply a convenient way

to avoid negative feedback from the white establishment.

Dedicate a street

Some communities have dedicated or designated a street for King, rather than renaming it.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, a black radio show host successfully pushed to have the city accept his idea of a street dedication. His proposal gained widespread support among his young, inner city black listeners, who thought that poverty and violence were more important issues within their community. The dedicated street is a major north-south artery, ironically named Division Avenue.

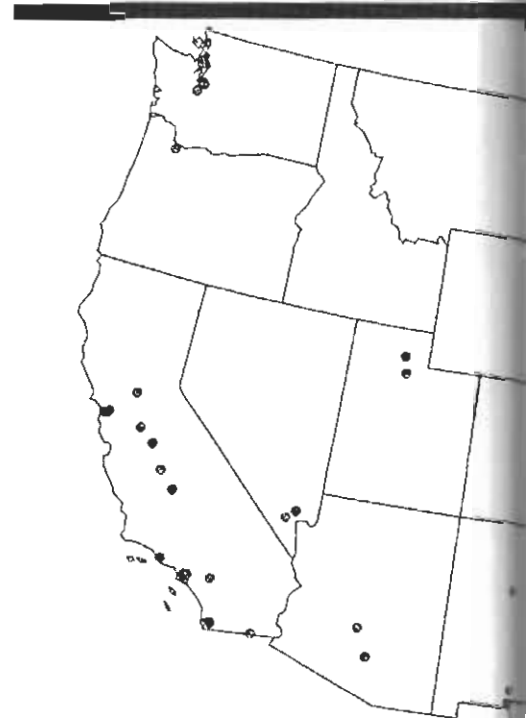
In contrast, members the Black Leadership Roundtable in High Point, North Carolina, have **come back** on a number of occasions over the **past decade** to request that a street be renamed instead of simply being dedicated. To date, their efforts have been unsuccessful.

It should be noted that when a street is dedicated, King's name is less likely to appear in city maps, business advertisements, and phone books. The power of commemorative street naming lies in its ability to incorporate history into the fabric of everyday life. It is much easier to avoid or ignore a sign that honors an historic figure than it is to ignore an address change, particularly along a major thoroughfare.

Further, dedication may not eliminate controversy. In 2003, the African American-led Quincy (Illinois) Community Coalition **agreed to have Eighth Street designated in honor of King rather than legally renamed**. But when **only a few signs** were installed along Eighth Street, **black leaders** requested that the road **be renamed**. This step led to intense public **debate** and the decision to keep King's commemoration **honorary**. Yet, even with the cost of an address change not an issue, some white citizens on South Eighth opposed having honorary King signs placed in their neighborhoods and argued for locating them solely in the more African American, northern portion of the street. A compromise **was eventually struck** and honorary signs were placed at **selected locations**.

Name a new road

In some communities, citizens and local officials



In 2003, about 730 streets across the U.S. had been named for Martin Luther King, Jr.

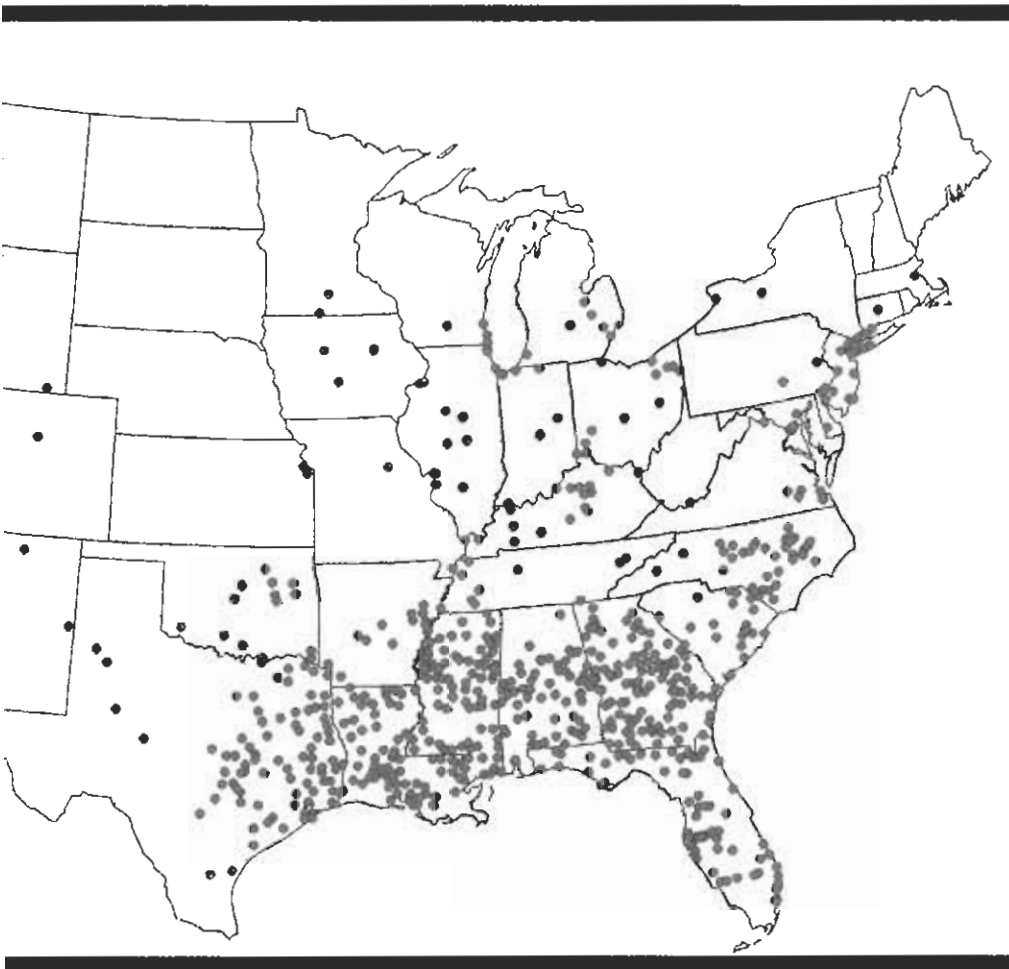
have suggested that naming a newly built or otherwise unnamed road is better than changing the name of an existing street. Honoring King on a new road has the advantage of ensuring that few, if any, residents or businesses would be impacted by an address change. Because some new **roads are** built in areas of planned or expected growth, the civil rights leader's name may very well have a prominent and positive place in the community's future.

This approach **was successful** in Wilmington, North Carolina, **where city** leaders attached King's name to a newly built parkway. Completed in 2005, the parkway is expected to spark new business and widespread revitalization.

Naming new roads has its disadvantages, though. New road construction is quite costly, and even after a new road is approved, several years may elapse before it is completed. Such a

Resources

In print. Derek H. Alderman, "Naming Streets after Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road," in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, 2006. "Branded: The Economic Geographies of MLK Streets," by Matthew Mitchellson, Derek H. Alderman, and Jeff Popke in *Social Science Quarterly*, 2007. Jonathan Tilove, *Along Martin Luther King: Travels Along Black America's Main Street*, 2003.



Black Activists, City Officials, and Martin Luther King

schedule could be interpreted as a purposeful delay. As King himself noted in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, "wait" usually means "never" in the African American community.

Further, the street in question may be so removed from the city—as with a bypass—that it has a greater impact on those traveling in and out of the city than those who live and work in local neighborhoods.

Enact a renaming ordinance

Many local governments are dealing with requests to rename streets by enacting ordinances that specify rules or requirements. Some ordinances require a large percentage of property owners abutting a street to approve a name change before it will be considered.

Government officials typically favor an ordinance approach because it shows sensitivity to those who would have to change their addresses and hence shoulder much (but not all) the cost of street renaming. Also, because many of these ordinances require a majority or even a supermajority (60 to 75 percent) of property owners to agree, there is a built-in guarantee that an address change will have public support, at least of those most closely involved.

Some African Americans leaders have voiced

support for this strategy, believing that it is a way to mobilize support for a King street and that it reduces the chances of reinstating the old street name. There are exceptions, though. After a controversial renaming in one Florida community, a candidate for city council who opposed the name change won a seat and eventually succeeded in getting the road's original name restored.

Other black activists claim, perhaps legitimately, that some municipal officials have developed and enforced these ordinances strategically to thwart requests to honor King outside the confines of the black community. It should be noted that because of the intense racial politics that often drive Martin Luther King street renamings, the chance of African Americans getting approval from a supermajority or even a majority of white property owners is slim. It is much more likely that black leaders could get support from property owners in their own neighborhoods.

However, the upshot would be that the renamed roads would be limited to African American neighborhoods—undercutting King's notion of integration and equality.

For planners and public managers, another option would be an ordinance that gives African

Americans a say in whether thoroughfares are identified with King even if they do not own property or live on the street. Such a perspective recognizes that a wide range of people use and identify with roads as public spaces, many of whom are ignored or disenfranchised within existing street renaming ordinances. At the heart of the ordinance issue is the question of boundaries and who has a stake in the decision-making politics of street renaming.

The point became clear in Zephyrhills, Florida, the community that reversed course on street naming. In 2003, an African American community leader suggested changing Sixth Avenue to Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. That individual lived just outside the city limits, in a predominately black neighborhood established during the days of segregation in the early 1960s.

Some white residents pointed out that the person in question had no standing with the city. Their position was bolstered by a 1987 ordinance that required a petition from residents living on a street to recommend a name change or authorize the city council to make the change. On the other hand, proponents of the street renaming maintained that they, too, had a say in the debate over a public thoroughfare, particularly one that members of the black community had used for more than 40 years.

After renaming Sixth Avenue for King in October 2003, Zephyrhills decided to stick by the 1987 law. Under intense public pressure, it rescinded the renaming in 2004.

Fast forward two years. In 2006, the city adopted a comprehensive ordinance on street name changes. The ordinance severely limits the potential of changing street names and spells out who has standing: property owners on the street, 75 percent of whom must approve of a name change before it is presented to the city council.

In our opinion, the street naming process is particularly contentious when it challenges long-established racial and economic boundaries within cities—the very same boundaries that King had hoped to destroy. While these named streets speak about the past, they perhaps say just as much about America in the present and the still unfinished nature of the civil rights movement.

David Alderman is an associate professor in the Department of Geography at East Carolina University. He has researched Martin Luther King streets for over a decade. Steve Spina is the city manager of Zephyrhills, Florida. Preston Mitchell is the town manager of Nashville, North Carolina.