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 officials must face every day. Yet, it is a practice of increasing importance to social and ethnic minorities in the U.S. as they seek ways to recognize their achievements and struggles and, in turn, to assert 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 stoppage matches at government meetings, boycotts of businesses, protest marches, petition drives, court appeals, the vandalizing of roads, and activists claiming themselves to street signs.

Much of the contentiousness arises when African Americans propose to rename a thoroughfare that carries 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 residents. 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.

Points of Intervention

In evaluating street-naming proposals, planners often select a number of smaller neighborhoods, including those that have been subject to economic distress. Others consider the impact of a change on property values, while also considering the impact of a change on the local economy. As a result, the community handles the seemingly unproblematic issue of naming a street after an important civil rights figure very well.

In finding an appropriate way to honor King on American 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 is to place his name on a section of a street located primarily within an African American community. This approach has the advantage of limiting opposition from white citizens. Whites seldom resist
Bumpy

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

Electoral 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 civic leaders are already designing a way to educate themselves and others about their own heritage and to develop a sense of empowerment and cultural identity.

When campaigning to have a street renamed in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, the director of the city's neighborhood community development corporation successfully proposed King Drive with ongoing attempts to rebuild the 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 commendable 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 impasse is that African Americans are racial outsiders and that major portions of the larger community are perceived as white and white historical figures.

In addition, this strategy often leads to the naming of signatures of segregation than of civil rights leaders which may contribute to confusion in traffic navigation as well as political discontent and debate.

Black leaders are increasingly demanding that local governments restrict the street-renaming tax and that King's name be moved to more prominent streets or extended for the entire 8th Street, 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 street strongly opposed the proposal. King Drive marks an area that is dominantly black, whereas East Fifth is nearly white. African American leaders have approved deep concessions 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 street 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 rename the existing King Drive back to West Fifth Street, a decision that prompted protests by African American leaders and others.

Rethinking a major thoroughfare for African Americans often inspires the renaming of an entire 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 addresses, proponents seek to make King's presence visible and personal to a larger section of the public.

Opponents often say an address change is an unaccountable financial inconvenience, but anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. In 2004, one year after the Eugenia Oregon city council renamed Commercial Boulevard for King, business was up dramatically on the street, reported the city council. 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 imprisonment in New York is a reminder of the ongoing struggle for racial justice. The city, which has seen significant progress in recent years, remains a symbol of the fight against systemic racism and police brutality.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His death sparked widespread protests and a national reckoning with racial inequality. The Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum, and there was a wave of solidarity with the fight for justice.

Since then, the focus has been on police reform, accountability, and the persistence of systemic racism. The movement has been met with resistance, but the momentum has been significant. The struggle continues, and the fight for racial justice is far from over.

It is important to remember that change is not instantaneous, and progress takes time. The work must continue, and we must remain vigilant in our pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

Resources

In print:

In digital:
- "Naming streets after Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road," 2006.

In discussion:
- "In the city of Charleston, South Carolina, the BLM movement has been particularly active. The city has implemented a number of initiatives to address police brutality and systemic racism.

In conclusion, the fight for racial justice is ongoing. It requires persistence, determination, and a commitment to equality. We must continue to work towards a society where all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their race or background.

In summary, the struggle for racial justice is not over. It requires ongoing effort and vigilance. We must continue to fight for a more just and equitable society, where every individual is valued and treated with the respect they deserve.
schedule could be interpreted as a gauntlet of delay. As King himself noted in his letter from Birmingham Jail, "we face a usual sort of 'inertia' in the African American community.

Further, the street in question may be so removed from the city center as to be bypassed — in effect, to have a greater impact on people traveling in and out of the city than those who live and work in local neighborhoods.

Even a measuring ordinance

Many local governments are dealing with the problem of racial and ethnic boundaries 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 address and hence shoulder much of 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 American leaders have voiced support for this strategy, believing that it is a way to mobilize support for King streets and that it reduces the chances of reimposing the old street names. This is a reasonable though.

After a commercial renaming in one Florida community, a candidate for city council who opposed the name change won a seat and eventually succeeded in quashing the road's original name restored.

Other black activists claim, perhaps logically, that some municipal officials have developed and unfurled these ordinances strategically to stave off a threat to honor King outside the context of the black community.

It should be noted that because of the increase in racist policies that often drive Martin Luther King street renaming, the change of African Americans getting approval from a supermajority or even a majority of white property owners is slim. There 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 — no renaming King's notion of integration and equality.

For planners and public managers, another option would bear ordinance changes that give African American a say in whether thoroughfares are identified with King streets if they do not own property on the street. Such an approach recognizes that a wide range of people use and identify with roads as public spaces, many of whom are ignored by the ordinance framework within existing street renaming ordinances. As 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 renaming. 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 predominantly 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 and authorize the city council to make the change. On the other hand, proponents of the street renaming maintained that they, too, had a stake in the city, even a public thoroughfare, particularly one that members of the black community had used for more than 40 years.

After renaming Sixth Avenue to King in October 2003, Zephyrhills decided to rescind 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 strictly limits the potential of changing street names and specifies who has standing: property owners on the street, 75 percent of whom must approve a name change before it is presented to the city council.

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