

May 24, 2005

Dear Mayor & Council -

Regarding the proposed renaming of Airport Rd to Martin Luther King Jr (Road?):

- ① I am in favor of a permanent honor for Dr. King but not by renaming Airport Rd.
- ② The name (MLK Jr) is too long for a street sign
- ③ There are many, many other MLK Jr Rd's in the country; I think it makes the honor mean less.
- ④ A Road has nothing to do with the legacy of MLK Jr.
- ⑤ There are many local heroes of the civil rights movement who could/should be honored in this way

Since the future of the Airport is in doubt, this issue seems moot at this time, anyway. I would hate to see Chapel Hill divided by this -

Sincerely,

Eleanor Howe  
135 State St. Dr.  
Chapel Hill NC 27574

# Honor for Dr. King Splits Florida City, And Faces Reversal

By ABBY GOODNOUGH

ZEPHYRHILLS, Fla., May 8 — It is a languid, pretty street lined with fat orange trees and live oaks, buzzing lawn mowers, an occasional picket fence. It runs clear through town, ambling over the railroad tracks and ending at a pasture full of cows.

Its new name, Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, has been tearing Zephyrhills apart.

Last October, Irene Dobson, a black woman, asked the City Council to rename the street for Dr. King, as hundreds of other places have done since his death in 1968. On Oct. 27, it voted 4 to 1 to honor her request and ordered new signs for the street that had been Sixth Avenue.

The protests quickly began. A petition to recall the council members arose, along with another to overturn the decision. Sixth Avenue residents said that the Council had railroaded the plan without consulting them and that they did not want the bother of changing their addresses. A business owner told local newspapers that property values would fall, saying streets named after Dr. King were a guarantee of economic blight.

Their battle mirrors dozens that have erupted around the country over plans to rename streets for Dr. King, but with a twist: on Monday, the City Council is to finalize a reversal of its vote and remove Dr. King's name. The decision would put Zephyrhills among only a handful of cities that have put up street signs bearing Dr. King's name, then taken

Continued on Page A20

A20

YT

THE NEW YORK TIMES NATIONAL MONDAY, MAY 10, 2004

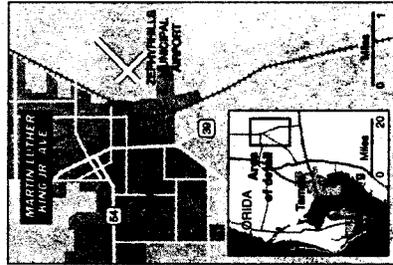
## An Honor for Dr. King Splits a Florida Town

Continued From Page A1

them down because of community uproar. Accusations of racism are swirling, supporters of the name change are picketing City Hall, and a white supremacist Web site is praising the Council's change of heart.

Virtually all of the protesters are white, as are most of the 11,000 people who live in Zephyrhills, which is 35 miles northeast of Tampa and known for the bottled spring water that carries its name, with the slogan "Pure Water from a Pure Place." Most of the roughly 100 people who signed Mrs. Dobson's petition requesting the name change are black. Many, like her, live near Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue on the other side of the train tracks, outside the city limits. But most residents of the renamed street are white.

Bitterness is everywhere: in the Crystal bar, where customers rolled their eyes when asked about the name change; in a driveway on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, where four men socializing after work said they had been robbed of their voice; and in front of City Hall, where Mae Pickett, waving a sign supporting the renaming, said the rift reminded her of 1967, when she and other black students joined whites at Zephyrhills High School instead of being bused to nearby Dade City.



The City Council voted last year to name Sixth Avenue for Dr. King.

renaming could keep visitors away or hurt property values. Jim Tenney, who owns a saddlery shop downtown, said he had briefly wondered if the renaming would hurt the town eco-

nomicly. "How could I not?" said Mr. Tenney, who said he liked the idea of honoring Dr. King but that the Council had rushed the process. "If you say that doesn't occur to you, you're not being honest."

Mr. Tenney, a member of the Zephyrhills Unity Initiative, a coalition of black and white residents that formed after the renaming to address racial divisions, said racism unquestionably exists here. He said he was shocked when a number of people attending a recent Founders' Day festival declined to sign the coalition's mission statement: "We want to live in a community that embraces cultural differences and encourages the individuality and abilities of all people to contribute to the fabric of the community."

"Why not sign something so basic?" Mr. Tenney said.

Steve Spina, the city manager, said city officials and protesters were discussing possible compromises: naming a planned water park or a new library for Dr. King, or keeping the new street signs up commemoratively while changing the official name back to Sixth Avenue.

Mrs. Dobson, who is 80, said she



A demonstration last week in Zephyrhills, Fla., supported Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue.

still hoped the Council would change its mind and keep the official name as Dr. King's, but that she was already looking ahead to other projects.

In the past, she pushed successfully to get streets paved and streetlights put up in the black neighborhood outside town, which is under the county's jurisdiction. Now, she and other protesters said, they may focus on recruiting new candidates for the Council.

"I'm not about to move away," she said, "and give them Zephyrhills."

for respect," said Ms. Pickett, who was among about 20 protesters at Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue and Eighth Street on Thursday afternoon. "They've put out all these excuses about the process not followed, but it's racism, plain and simple."

Just as emotional are those who fought the name change, or silently questioned it, and say they have been unfairly maligned.

"We're just kind of sick about the thing and wish it would go away," said Cullen E. Smith Jr., whose family has been here for six generations and whose son, Lance, was one of the City Council members who voted for the renaming. Cullen Smith said he would have preferred to name the street after Abraham Lincoln, who he said had done "more for the black people than just about anybody."

"We're being portrayed as a racist little town, but I don't think they've really understood the heart of Zephyrhills," Mr. Smith said.

Derek Alderman, a geography professor at East Carolina University who has studied the politics of naming streets for Dr. King, said that at least 650 streets have been given his name in at least 41 states, often not without controversy.

Most of the streets are in the South, in places where the population is at least 30 percent black. Georgia, Dr. King's birthplace, has the most, Dr. Alderman said. Many run mostly through black neighborhoods, he said, often because efforts to name a central thoroughfare for Dr. King fail.

"The second choices are often not the most prominent, the most healthy streets," Dr. Alderman said.

San Diego's decision to rename a major thoroughfare, Market Street, for Dr. King in 1986 was so unpopular that residents got an initiative on the ballot a year later to change the name back, and won. And in 1979, the Alabama Legislature repealed a 1976 resolution naming a section of an interstate highway after Dr. King.

But far more common, Dr. Alderman said, is for a city to scrap contentious plans to rename a street well before new signs go up. That happened last year in Muncie, Ind., and more recently in Portsmouth, N.H., which decided to name a park for Dr. King instead.

Here, as elsewhere, most opponents of the renaming who are willing to talk publicly say that they are not racist, and that their concerns are purely pragmatic. Residents of the street said they did not want the inconvenience of changing their addresses and that it made no sense, since the city is laid out on a grid of numbered streets and avenues.

The outcry led one council member who had approved it to propose rescinding the decision in November. The move failed then. There has been no recall vote, but in a regular election last month, Lance Smith lost his Council seat to Gina King, who lives on the street and had promised to force a new vote on the issue if elected.

On April 26, before an emotional crowd of 200, the Council voted 3-2 to rescind the name change. A final vote is scheduled for Monday night.

"It has nothing to do with racism," said Rich LaCasse, a retired business owner. "We were never given an option. I was ignored as a resident. They made changes on my turf without my knowledge."

To be sure, some residents have publicly questioned whether Dr. King deserved a street named in his honor. Ben Youmans, a Vietnam veteran who lives on the street, said in letters to local newspapers that he resented Dr. King for protesting the war and for creating "divisiveness and discontent."

Still others said that since streets named for Dr. King often run through blighted neighborhoods, the