

Crying Shame



Eugene is one of the whitest larger cities in the nation. Only 1 percent of the city is African American while 92 percent is white. But that doesn't mean that Eugene can't have the scalding racial politics that stew in big cities. Witness the recent all-consuming debate over renaming Centennial Boulevard after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The uproar featured a riot of charges of racism, classism, insensitivity and racial demagoguery, dividing liberals and conservatives amongst themselves, and perhaps jeopardizing councilors' political futures. It wasn't what the slain civil rights leader dreamed of, but, in the end, the blood-letting turned out to be more about Eugene than King. Here's the story of Eugene's rocky road to racial reconciliation. The article continues next week with part II.

The idea to rename Centennial after King originated with the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) early last year. The group chose the street over others because of the prestige and high exposure lent by the adjacent UO football stadium, which brings tens of thousands of visitors to the area. "That was the main attraction," said Dennis Shine, an NAACP board member.

Ed Coleman, a retired UO professor and leader in the African-American community, said UO football, and the big money it brings into Eugene, is a source of pride for many in the local African American Community. "We have been winning with football and football has been winning because of the African American players."

Another attraction of Centennial was that it included relatively few different property owners and businesses that would have to change their address, Coleman said. "They chose something that they felt would not be as controversial."

County Commissioner Bobby Green, also a NAACP member, brought the Centennial proposal to the County Commission. Commissioners supported the idea of renaming a street. But in June Commissioner Dwyer from Springfield pointed out that most of Centennial Boulevard is in Springfield, has hundreds of residential and business addresses, and could face strong opposition from those who didn't want to change their address.

Dwyer was "very much opposed" to renaming the Springfield section, Shine said. Shine said he heard e-mails to one Springfield city councilor ran 20-1 against renaming Centennial. Dwyer suggested Beltline, a highway with few addresses, as a possible alternative.

Commissioner Green told *The Register-Guard* on June 11 that the public should let commissioners know their thoughts on the renaming decision. "We also want to have a lot of public involvement in this decision."

The county board voted unanimously last June to pursue renaming a street by sending letters to the Eugene and Springfield city councils inviting them to help choose an appropriate road.

The Eugene City Council responded by assigning Councilor Bonny Bettman to meet with county officials regarding the renaming.

Shine, a Springfield resident, said government and NAACP officials from Eugene made the mistake of assuming Springfield would follow Eugene in renaming the street. There wasn't a full appreciation of the larger impact on Springfield in terms of the larger number of addresses and businesses impacted, according to Shine.

"The assumption was whatever Eugene does Springfield will go along," Shine said. "I don't think they really thought that much about it [Springfield]. They thought primarily in relation to the football stadium," he said.

Too often, people in Eugene have an attitude toward more blue-collar Springfield that "we know better than you do," Shine said. That sentiment leads to resentment and friction on both sides, he said. "There's a definite class feeling."

Shine said he persuaded the NAACP board to back off on renaming Centennial in Springfield and pursue renaming the planned Pioneer Parkway Extension to be built to the new PeaceHealth Hospital as an alternative.

After resistance from Springfield to renaming Centennial, County Commissioner Pete Sorenson said he looked into the two cities renaming Beltline as an alternative. But he found that ODOT has a policy against renaming state facilities after non-Oregonians and such a renaming would likely take an act of the state Legislature.

Shine said many of the other streets proposed had problems or would not be as prestigious as the Autzen Stadium location. He doubted funding could be found for a statue.

Unanimous Start

On Jan. 13, 2003, Bettman reported back to the council that the County Commission and NAACP supported the renaming of Centennial in Eugene and had received written support from the UO. The council voted unanimously to initiate the process to rename the street.

The issue returned to the Eugene City Council on Feb. 10. Acting City Manager Jim Carlson told councilors that he had met with the Springfield city manager and county administrator and they had suggested Eugene consider other options than Centennial through an intergovernmental group, according to meeting minutes. But Carlson told councilors that Commissioner Bobby Green had written the city of Eugene stating that the county board "was not interested in forming an intergovernmental body and preferred to see the city move forward with the process of renaming Centennial Boulevard inside its city limits." Carlson recommended that Eugene proceed with the renaming process without working with Springfield.

Mayor Jim Torrey and Councilors Gary Papé and Nancy Solomon expressed concerns that other alternatives for the renaming weren't adequately considered and that Springfield was not given sufficient chance to participate in the decision. Torrey said renaming Centennial in Eugene but not Springfield could make Springfield look like it did not care about Dr. King, according to meeting minutes.

Carlson said informal discussions among local chief administrators about the renaming had begun nine months earlier. "Springfield was aware that the discussions were occurring," Carlson said in meeting minutes.

At a public forum after the council discussion, eight people spoke in favor of renaming Centennial.

In April, city planning staff recommended that the Eugene Planning Commission approve the street renaming request for Centennial. Twelve property owners with 202 addresses would be given a year transition to change addresses.

Kevin Wells, chair of the Harlow Neighborhood Association, wrote the Planning Commission "to inform you of the association's opposition" to the name change.

Earl Gosnell of Eugene wrote an eight-page letter opposing the name change. In his letter, Gosnell described King as a "womanizing, plagiarizing, troublemaking civil rights leader."

A flier distributed on Centennial Boulevard in Springfield called King a "communist, woman-beater, plagiarist, subversive, adulterer, sexual deviant." The flier identified itself as from Volksfront. The Portland-based group has been condemned as a white supremacist hate group.

Four businesses, Waterfront Bar & Grill, Mercedes-Benz of Eugene, Carter & Carter Financial and Curtis Restaurant Equipment, wrote in to oppose the change because of the cost of having to change stationery and notify customers.

Four other people also wrote to oppose the renaming citing the existing historic name celebrating the state's first 100 years, confusion and renaming costs. Kathy Burton wrote the city's tiny African American community did not justify the change. "This isn't Atlanta," she wrote.

Sean McCartin supported the renaming but called on the city to bring Springfield on board. "In the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., a unified consensus would echo much of what he wanted to achieve," he wrote. Having the street name end in Springfield, "would taint this change quite a bit."

At the April 22 hearing before the Eugene Planning Commission on the name change, 20 people supported the renaming and seven opposed it. Planning commissioners expressed some concern that the City Council had not directed them to also examine other alternatives and concern that the name would not extend into Springfield. But given the strong show of support, the Planning Commission voted unanimously for renaming Centennial.