

Part I: Eugene's winding rocky road to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. ■ By Alan Pittman

Which Side are You On?

The Eugene City Council scheduled a second public hearing for May 27. Before the hearing, nine people wrote in opposing the renaming and seven wrote letters of support. The County Commission offered to cover the full cost (up to \$10,000) of new signs for the road.

At the public hearing before the council, 29 people spoke in favor of re-naming Centennial and only one against.

Commissioner Green testified that suggestions for alternative things to rename, like the Ferry Street Bridge, were too late. Green warned that if the council failed to rename Centennial, it "will be viewed as lip service as usual" by African Americans.

NAACP President Marilyn Mays called opposition to renaming Centennial a "disheartening and discouraging and a tough lesson" in "subtle racism." With the "show of subtle racism," Mays said, "a message is being sent loud and clear that we are not wanted here."

Green and Mays did not return calls requesting further comment for this story.

Former Eugene Police Chief Jim Hill supported the renaming and warned that if the council voted against it, "the impact in race relations in our community will be felt for years to come."

Betty Snowden said objections to renaming Centennial aren't really about the costs of businesses changing addresses. "This is about the city fathers not wanting to be a part of a city street being named after a black man."

Carmen Urbina, director of El Centro Latino Americano, testified that she's regularly followed in stores because of her skin color. "We know that racism is in this community, I feel it every single day."

Urbina called on the council to rename the street to "take a stand against racism."

Mark Harris said the Ferry Street Bridge was the site of an early tent city that African Americans were forced to live in because they were banned from living in town. The community was later forced out without provision for new homes when the bridge was enlarged, he said. Given the history, renaming the bridge would be "a slap in the face" for the African-American Community, he said.

Ed Coleman called suggested alternatives to Centennial a "ruse" to avoid naming something prominent after King. Coleman sang the civil rights song, "Which side are you on?"

Scott Bartlett testified that the renaming would have little impact on residents. Most addresses on the street were student apartments that change tenants yearly, he said. He urged the council to, "dig deep and stand tall and do the right thing."

Matthew Hasek spoke with difficulty from a wheelchair in support of the renaming. "It is 2003, why in the world are we having this discussion tonight?"

Marl Carter of Staff Jennings boat center defended his opposition to the renaming. "I'm not prejudiced," he said, but said businesses should have been given more say in the street name change.

During council discussion after the hearing, Councilor Betty Taylor praised King as "one of the greatest people of the 20th century." But she said, "we dishonor him by causing dissension in his name," by "name calling," not respecting the impact of the name change on businesses and residents and in hurting the city's relationship with Springfield.

Councilor Gary Papé said the council shouldn't "put our blinders on" and think renaming Centennial is the only option to honor King. "Dr. King deserves to be much better honored in our community."

Councilor George Poling said he opposed renaming a street named to honor the pioneers. "There's only been three people who are supportive of all the people I've talked to."

Councilor Nancy Nathanson said she favored delaying the decision to September so a broad committee would have a chance to examine alternatives. "I very much want to avoid a divisive decision."

Councilor Scott Meisner said the council made the process more divisive by not asking a committee to examine all the naming options, not just Centennial.

Mean Streets of Eugene

Out of the 2,500 or so street names listed in the Eugene/Springfield area phone book, many are named for plant life – Dogwood, Jasmine, Ivy; others for women's names – Sharon, Isabelle, Ellen; still others for fruits – Quince, Apple, Cherry. There are several variations on "river" – River Pointe, Riverview, River Walk, Riverbend. A pocket of streets is named for cities in Canada and another named for the Cayman Islands. Close to the heart of town, arterial streets are named for presidents – Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln; and early settlers – Kincaid, Patterson, Bailey.

Of these same 2,500 streets, none are named for feminists, Asians, Native Americans, Latinos, or out and proud homosexuals. Way out toward Mount Pisgah, off Seavey Loop, is a cluster of streets with Spanish-based names – El Toro, Del Rio, El Manor, El Centro. El Centro? You can bet that this is nowhere near "the center" of anything, except for the road to Goshen.

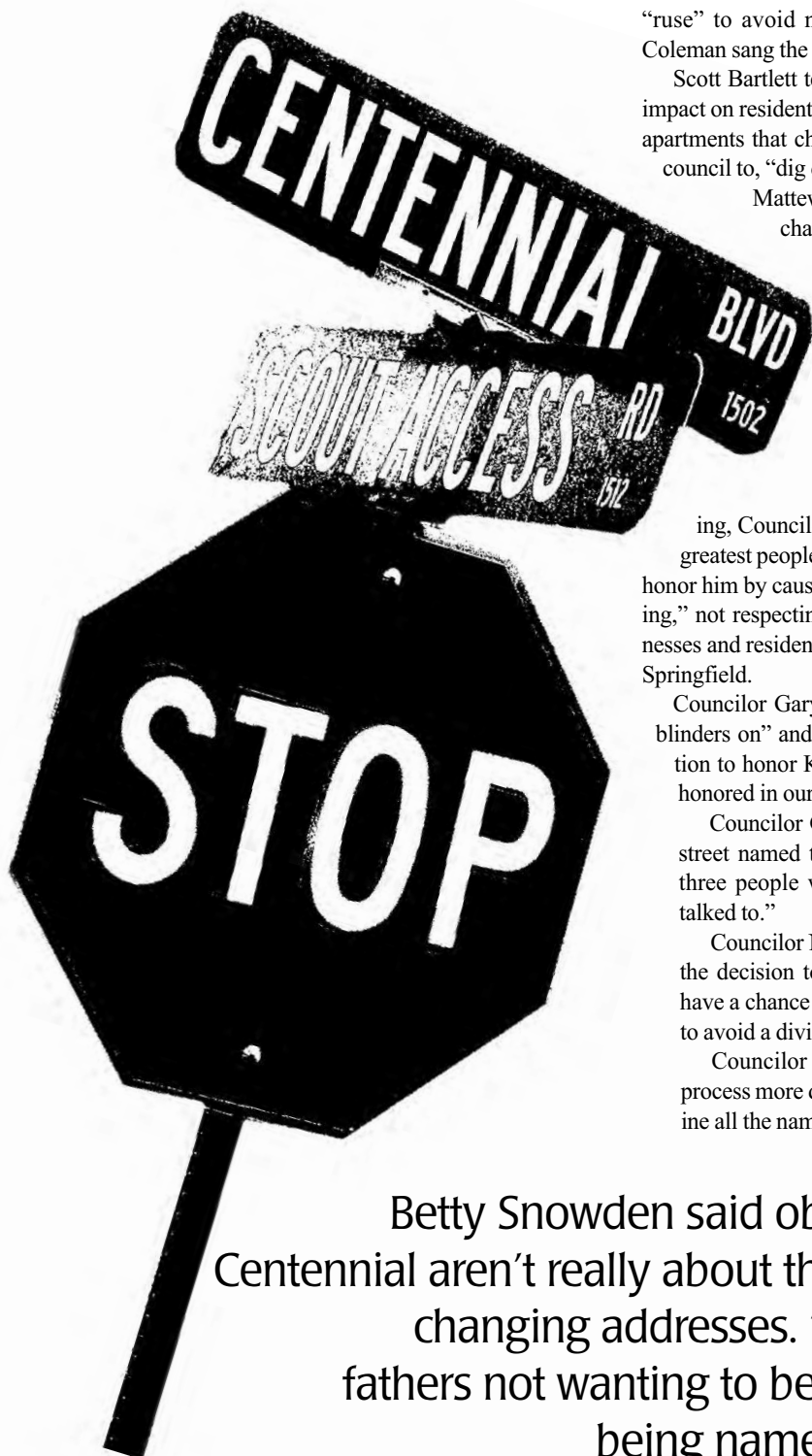
Some of the more prominent street namesakes in this town, and even this county's namesake, have less than savory histories. There's the relatively recent uncovering of Thomas Jefferson's liaisons with his female slaves. "Honest John" Whiteaker, Oregon's first governor, was an advocate of slavery. Judge Matthew Deady said of Whiteaker, "Old Whit ... Wrong in the head in politics, he is honest and right in the heart" (see www.endoftheoregonrail.org).

There are connections between county namesake General Joseph Lane (also a proponent of slavery and secession) and The Knights of the Golden Circle, a precursor group to the Klu Klux Klan. The tie to the group carried through to the next generation: In the article "State Of Jefferson Vision Hangs On," written for the State of Jefferson website, James T. Rock writes, "Joseph Lane's daughter Winnifred marries Lafayette F. Mosher ... L.F. Mosher had political connections. He also had, or is rumored to have had, close connections with the Western Division of the Knights of the Golden Circle. He was commander of this pro-Southern forerunner of the Ku Klux Klan."

Mark Harris, LCC faculty member and proponent of the Centennial-to-MLK Jr. name change, explains that there are two streets in Eugene named for African Americans – Sam R Road, a short, jagged jog off W. 11th Avenue, just east of Bertelsen; and Moon Lee Lane, a snippet of street in the university neighborhood. Moon Lee Lane is named for former UO administrator Don Moon Lee. Harris, in his May 19 written testimony to the Eugene City Council in favor of the Centennial name change, mentions Sam R as Sam Reynolds, owner of a juke joint in what was once Eugene's Ferry Street Community – an area created by blacks when they were not allowed to live within five miles of Eugene proper. Geographically minimal compared with other streets in the city, Sam R Road and Moon Lee Lane seem to only highlight the under-representation of diversity in Eugene street names.

Perhaps the discussion and negotiations around the boulevard name change is just the stickiest beginning of eliminating that under-representation. Maybe someday, in with the presidents and pioneers, we will smoothly cross the intersection at Che Guevara and Ghandi Avenue, or at Betty Friedan Boulevard and Mandela Street.

–Bobbie Willis



Betty Snowden said objections to renaming Centennial aren't really about the costs of businesses changing addresses. "This is about the city fathers not wanting to be a part of a city street being named after a black man."