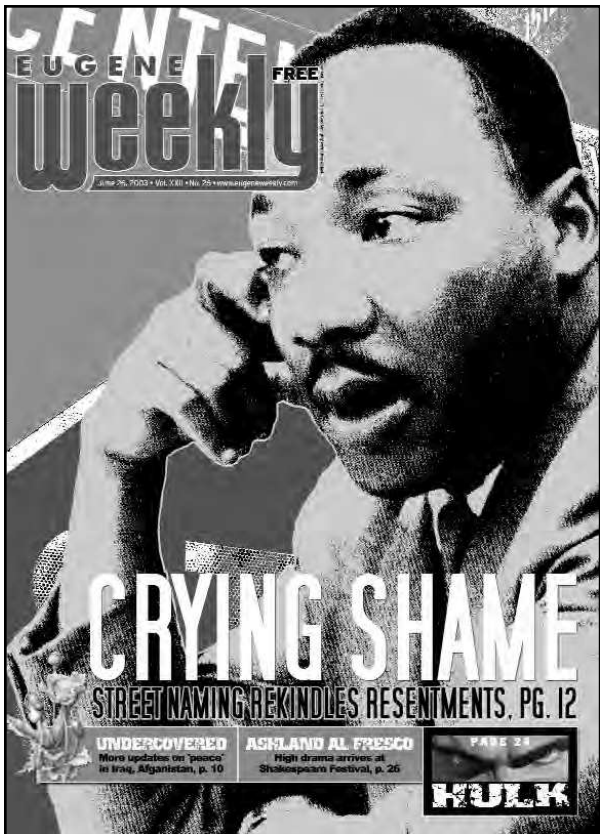


Crying Shame II



The uproar over renaming Centennial Boulevard to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. featured a riot of charges of racism, classism, insensitivity and racial demagoguery, dividing liberals and conservatives amongst themselves, and perhaps even 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.

Last week, EW published the first part of "Crying Shame," on how the idea to rename Centennial originated with the NAACP and headed for a train wreck in the Eugene City Council. In Part II this week, the council flip-flops amid waves of backlash. Both parts of this story can be read together at www.eugeneweekly.com

Continuing the convoluted tale of MLK and Centennial Boulevard. ■ By Alan Pittman

The Centennial renaming train collided with the Eugene City Council on June 9. Councilor Gary Papé moved to form a committee including the NAACP and other community members to study renaming Centennial and all other options and report back to the council this fall.

Papé said Springfield should have been more involved in the process and it should have included a broad citizen committee looking at all options.

Councilor Bonny Bettman said the council should vote now to rename Centennial because the "minimal" inconvenience and cost to business was superceded by the "best interests of the city." She quoted King stating how he was "greatly disappointed" with white moderates who could be worse than outright racists. Such a moderate "constantly advises the Negro to wait for a more convenient season" before pushing for change, King said. "Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection," Bettman quoted King to applause from renaming supporters.

Bettman said she was "flabbergasted" that the opposition of a few inconvenienced businesses would be enough to prevent the renaming. She said any street renaming would have some opposition. Streets like Beltline without addresses aren't as meaningful, she said. "There're lots of cars, but nobody lives there," Bettman said. "Where is the honor in naming a street that nobody cares about?"

Councilor Betty Taylor said the council should not dismiss the importance of the name "Centennial" in celebrating state history. "I don't think the street belongs to any particular group," she said. It should be renamed only after an inclusive process. "It may end up that [renaming] is what will happen, but it needs to include the whole community."

Councilor George Poling also faulted the renaming process for not including the broader community and said his constituents were "overwhelmingly" opposed.

Councilor David Kelly said the renaming would send an important message to people of color. The renaming "is not about concrete, it's about respect."

Councilor Scott Meisner said he had worked for civil rights but had problems with the renaming. "We need to do more than just name a street," he said. The city should create an effective memorial, "not just put up a street sign that people may or may not pay attention to."

Councilor Nancy Nathanson said the council shouldn't have a divisive vote to honor King. A split vote for renaming would be interpreted as "just as racist" as a "no" vote, she said. "This is such a complicated issue," she said. "It's heartbreaking for me as a councilor."

Councilor Jennifer Solomon said she and all the people she had talked to would like to see a better memorial to King than renaming Centennial. She said she was "baffled at how this has become a Centennial-or-nothing debate."

"I don't accept Eugene as being the most prejudiced" city, Mayor Jim Torrey said. But Torrey said the council should take the recommendation of the African-American community and rename the street now. "It is time to move forward."

Kelly said the city should not "draw out the agony" with a committee.

The committee proposal "is really a slap in the face to the African-American community," Bettman said.

The council voted 6-2 to delay the renaming until a broad committee could report back on Centennial and other options in September. Kelly and Bettman voted to rename Centennial now and Nathanson, Taylor, Papé, Poling, Meisner and Solomon voted to wait for the committee.

The crowd of supporters in the council chamber erupted in loud boos and chants of "shame, shame, shame!"

The next day, NAACP leaders announced that they were so angered by the council that they would refuse to serve on the proposed committee.

Some county commissioners also threatened to boycott the city renaming committee. "I found the council's action offensive and disheartening," Commissioner Dwyer said.

A *Register-Guard* editorial accused the "clueless" council of "a profound wounding and alienating of the black community."

Backlash

Hearing of the backlash, Mayor Jim Torrey called a leading opponent, Bob Mylenek of the Mercedes dealership on Centennial to ask him to withdraw his opposition. Torrey urged Mylenek to contact councilors and tell them he had changed his mind, according to Councilor Papé. Torrey told Mylenek "his stance was going to hurt his business," Papé said. Torrey also warned Mylenek that "Nancy [Nathanson] had a lot to lose with regards to her potential candidacy for mayor," Papé said.

Torrey said he did contact Mylenek to talk about the impact of his opposition on the community, the UO and others. He said he also contacted Nathanson to urge her to reconsider her vote.

The next day, June 11, Nathanson moved to reconsider the vote against immediately renaming Centennial.

Meisner said he would vote for renaming Centennial. Meisner said he had hoped that the committee could build community understanding. But given the NAACP boycott, "That's clearly impossible and I don't think the committee can accomplish anything," he said. "There is no willingness to work toward building community."

Nathanson faulted the *R-G* and television news for incorrectly reporting that the council had voted *against* renaming Centennial rather than delaying the decision to study Centennial along with other options. "The media did not report it correctly. Some of the media were reporting Centennial was not going to be renamed but that [street] was going to be included as one of the options."

Nathanson said if the committee was not possible, she would vote to rename Centennial now as the best available option. "It's still important to recognize the legacy of Dr. King."

Meisner and Nathanson provided the key votes to bring the issue back before the council on a 5-3 vote with Poling, Papé and Taylor remaining in opposition.

Papé charged that proponents had somehow fooled him into thinking that there was a broad committee at the outset looking at other options. "We were misled to believe there was a committee process to be run by a county commissioner and that didn't happen," he said.

Papé said he "was really disappointed by some of the comments we had at the public hearing. I think we all in this room want to honor Dr. King," he said. "I think it's its own unique form of bigotry to say we know how to honor Dr. King better than you. I think that is what is happening here rather than what I think Dr. King would want, which is a communal recognition."

Solomon said, "I'm very upset that this has become a litmus test as to whether or not we're racist. I think it is a very cowardly strategy, and it has generated far more ill will than good will in our community. We have always wanted to do something for MLK around this table, it's just a question of what."

"Part of that community is unwilling to come to the table and be a part of what's in the best interests of the community," Solomon said. "If that's the best they can do, if that's what they want, if they think this is honorable, then I am willing to vote for renaming Centennial."

Bettman said no one said there was a committee looking at options at the outset. As for looking at more and more alterna-