

tives, Bettman said, "Dr. King has been dead for 35 years and until the NAACP put a proposal on the table, nobody had really talked about doing anything."

Bettman said the process had already included two public hearings and lots of media coverage with ample opportunity for comment. "This was one of the most widely publicized processes that we've ever endeavored to proceed with."

"Why are we doing this in such a hurry and why does one minority group have such power?" Taylor asked.

The council voted six to two (Poling and Taylor opposed) to change the name of Centennial to Martin Luther King Boulevard.

Bettman quoted Dr. King: "Amen."



## Backlash Again

After the decision, the council got some backlash from opponents. "The people who insist on changing Centennial to MLK using threats and blackmail are most definitely the racists!" said one anonymous e-mail to councilors. "To truly get what they want, there would be white people lynched in the streets."

Clara Nistler of Eugene e-mailed, "I do not believe racism exists in Eugene anymore from the white side as it does from the black population. In fact, I'm really weary about hearing it raise its ugly head whenever someone of color feels offended and someone disagrees with their decision."

Lisa Hunter e-mailed that she supports a memorial for King but "Forcing the change of Centennial down our throats is making a lot of us gag." She wrote that "When [proponents] didn't get their way, they behaved childishly, yelling, screaming and calling names."

An anonymous e-mail from "a Springfield neighbor" was openly racist. "You folks are a real piece of work, a bunch of wimpy spineless back pedaling idiots. I propose you rename Centennial Loop, James Earl Ray Loop. I think the community would have been better served by having a MLK memorial urinal at City Hall. Or even better yet an MLK watermelon patch at Alton Baker Park."

Mayor Torrey responded, "You, sir or madam, are pitiful! Your comments are exactly why we needed to provide a memorial that the African-American community felt was the most appropriate from their perspective."

Munir Katul, a member of the Eugene Police Commission, e-mailed that "the original process was flawed, and not inclusive. Is there racism in Eugene? Yes. Should MLK be honored in a significant and visible fashion? Yes. Is one a racist for not supporting one specific proposal for achieving these goals? No."

"I am disappointed in the NAACP position of 'my way or no way,'" Katul wrote. "I understand the depth of their feelings, but what they have achieved in taking such a position is to allow real racists to cover up their racism by hiding under legitimate concerns regarding the renaming process. The zealotry of the NAACP leadership has not helped the causes of minorities and civil rights in Eugene."

Councilor Taylor e-mailed Councilor Bettman, a frequent political ally, "I hope we can leave this episode behind and continue to work for the interests of Eugene."

But Bettman e-mailed back, "I'll never be able to reconcile why you took such a position" against the renaming.

But the controversy was still not put to rest. On June 18, Councilor Papé threatened to use a council rule to bring the issue back to the table for another vote unless he and Councilor Poling were given five minutes to talk about the "foul stew" surrounding the vote to rename the street.

Kelly said the council should let the matter rest. "Every

minute we spend going back over this decision is a minute that is bad for the community," he said. "Somebody told me today the first rule of holes which is when you're in a hole, stop digging."

The council tied 4-4 on whether to reopen the issue. Mayor Torrey joined Papé, Poling, Taylor, and Solomon to break the tie in favor of giving each councilor five minutes of time to discuss the renaming.

Papé complained that, unlike other councilors, he was not informed that the renaming decision would be reconsidered during the June 11 meeting. He said the "ambush" vote and the mayor contacting Mylenek to urge him to lobby councilors after the public record was closed was "rotten."

Nathanson said over the past two years she and the mayor have had continuing talks about her running for mayor. "This is something political people do," she said. She denied her possible candidacy had anything to do with the vote to rename Centennial.

Bettman said calls like the mayor's "happen all the time. There was nothing improper there."

"That's basically politics as usual," Bettman said. "The only difference I see here is Councilor Papé and Poling didn't get their way."

Kelly said it would have been better if Nathanson had notified all councilors about reconsidering the vote. The mayor's contact with Mylenek was "probably inappropriate" given the quasi-judicial decision, Kelly said. But he didn't see it as a big deal. "I don't understand what the problem is."

Taylor said the mayor was wrong to distribute a letter to councilors from Mylenek stating his change of mind. Other people had been told that their comments wouldn't be forwarded to the council because the record was closed, she pointed out. "The process was really rotten from beginning to end."

"The process was a foul process," Torrey agreed, but denied he did anything wrong.

## Racial Politics

After the meeting, Papé said in an interview that he was "hoping it wasn't going to be politics as usual" when it came to the renaming decision.

Papé said he had talked to a half dozen African Americans who preferred the council rename something else. "The NAACP does not represent all the African Americans in our community."

Papé said the "half a street" renaming was "half baked." He said, "If we can't have all of Centennial let's do something better."

Taylor agreed with Papé. "The African-American community is not just the NAACP," she said in an interview. She said she heard privately from African Americans who wanted other, more prominent options, such as a renamed Ferry Street Bridge with a statue, but none testified. "It became intimidating."

Many councilors gave in because they were "afraid of appearing to be racist," Taylor said. "I don't think anybody on the council is racist," she said. "I don't think it's insensitive" to not agree with the NAACP, she said.

Taylor said she worked for fair housing rights in Illinois and has an African-American biracial granddaughter and three biracial great-grandchildren.

Taylor said she got flack from liberal friends for her position. People told her, "You're committing political suicide."

But Taylor said she never decides what's right based on reelection and many people admire her independence. "I wouldn't want to pretend to be something I'm not."

Taylor and many other liberals in the community have clashed before with leaders of the NAACP on issues. County Commissioner Bobby Green and NAACP leader Henry Luvert condemned widespread opposition to Hynix wetland destruction permits and tax breaks as racist. In 1997 Green and Luvert called Taylor racist for saying that she doubted a light-skinned African-American candidate for the city Human Rights Committee had been discriminated against as much as she said because she looked white. In 1998, Taylor and other liberals supported former City Manager Vicki Elmer, a former Peace Corps volunteer who had pushed for affirmative action in Berkeley. NAACP members wanted Elmer fired for ousting African-American Police Chief Leonard Cooke.

Taylor says the earlier clashes didn't affect her position on the renaming. But "it's really unfortunate that people rush to call people racist instead of looking at the real issues."

Bettman said Taylor and other opponents erred in not recognizing that the renaming process was about more than just choosing the best street. "It was also very much about respecting and appreciating and recognizing our local African-American community and other minority communities," she said in an interview.

"Too many people in Eugene don't want to come to terms with the fact, and it is a fact, that Eugene is basically insensitive to people of color. They don't get it," Dennis Shine, an NAACP board member, said in an interview. Shine said Eugene handled the renaming worse than Springfield.

But Ed Coleman, a retired UO professor and leader in the African-American community, said Springfield is not better than Eugene on racial issues. It remains to be seen what Springfield will name, he said. So far, "Springfield hasn't done anything."

Coleman said he doesn't agree that Eugene is a lot worse than other places on race. He points out that many cities across the nation have struggled with which street to name for King. "This is not a Eugene issue. This is an American issue."

"People in Eugene are for the most part very good decent people," Coleman said. But after the "painful" renaming, "The whole notion of being a liberal community is sort of suspect."

Coleman said Papé and Taylor were "stubborn." But he said renaming opponents on the council were not racist. "They do things out of ignorance and not necessarily out of racism. It's insensitivity."

The renaming was not just a bunch of African Americans "playing the race card" to get what they wanted, Coleman said. Three-fourths of supporters at hearings were white, he said. In Eugene, "there are a lot of white people that are more adamant about racism than the people of color," Coleman said. "This was not just a racial victory. This was a community victory." **EW**

