

'Greater Good' Cited in Name Change

Union Avenue became Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard after much debate

BY SEAN P. NELSON
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

"The torturous road which has lead from Montgomery to Oslo is a road over which millions of Negroes are traveling to find a sense of dignity. It will, I'm convinced, be widened into a superhighway of justice,"—Martin Luther King Jr. speech accepting Nobel Peace Prize, Dec. 11, 1964.

Thirteen years ago in April the Portland City Council changed the name of Union Avenue to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard by a 5-0 vote.

The Council voted to name the street after the civil rights leader despite opposition by business owners along the street. The approval followed an opinion by the city attorney that said a renaming committee didn't have to garner the support of neighborhood and business associations.

Martin Luther King Jr. Renaming Committee Chair Carolyn Leonard was surprised by the move.

"Hey, they are rational. I'm very impressed with the City Council and the Planning Commission. They were willing to look beyond the individual citizen to the greater good. It isn't easy to go against the tide of overwhelming numbers of individuals," Leonard told *The Oregonian*.

The City Council approved the name change in hopes of changing the negative image of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, a street that was plagued by vice and crime at the time.

Nine years before the vote, the council rejected a proposal to name North Williams and Vancouver Avenues after Malcolm X, who

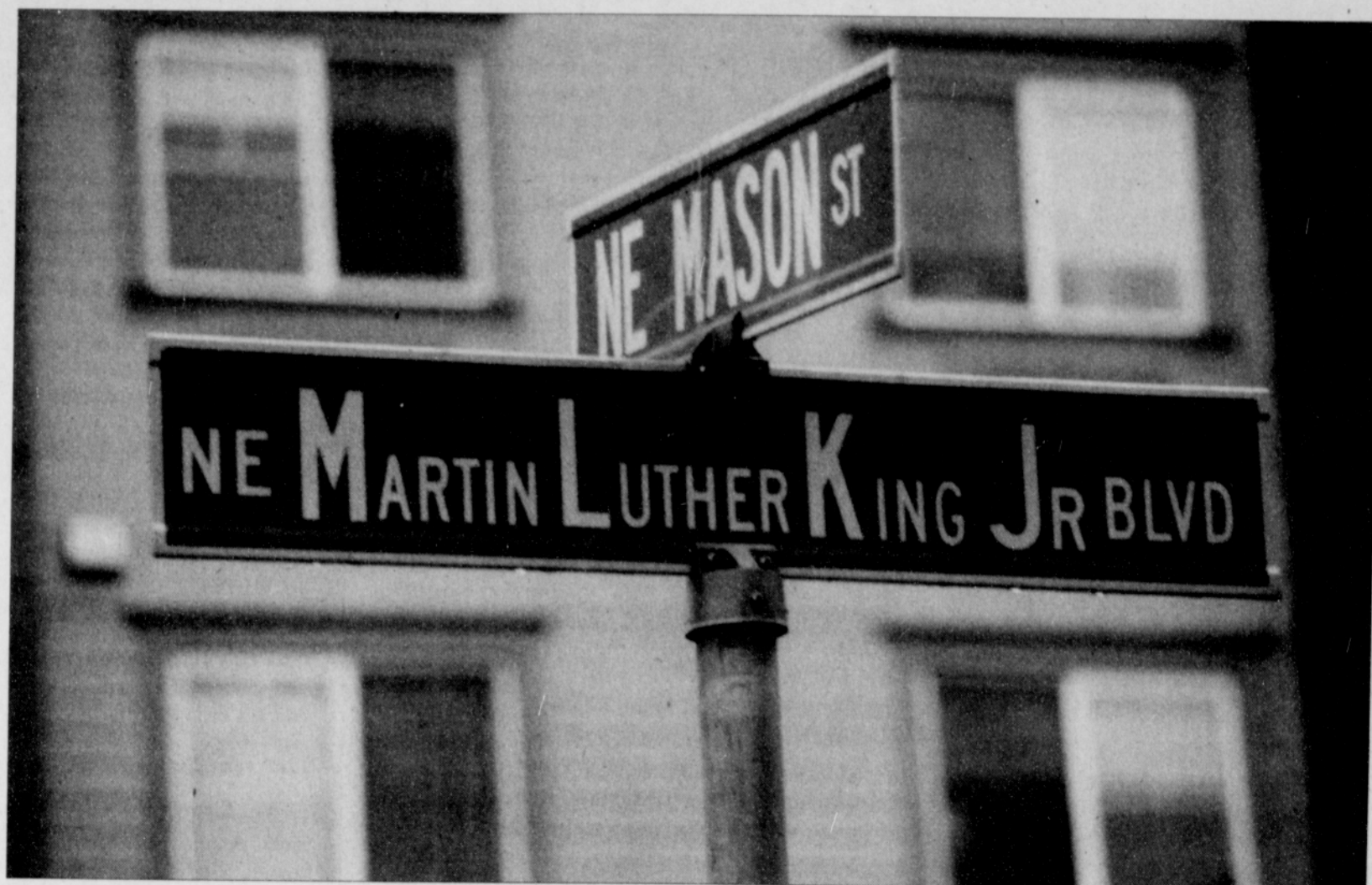


PHOTO BY DAVID PLECHL/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

was assassinated in 1965, and Rosa Parks who sparked the civil rights movement by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in 1955.

"Union Avenue is the symbolic avenue for the health and vitality of north and northeast Portland," said then-City Commissioner Mike Lindberg.

He added that Malcolm X, who advocated Black Nationalism, was a more controversial figure than King.

"Martin Luther King Jr. is universally respected," Lindberg said.

This was the second time the street name was changed. In 1891 when the cities of Port-

land, East Portland and Albina consolidated, city officials renamed the several streets to Union Avenue in honor of the Union Army of the North winning the Civil War.

Many business owners on or near the street strenuously opposed the more recent name change. Five of them appealed to the state's Land Use Board of Appeals (LUBA). They were City Antiques, City Liquidators, Roth BMW, Burns Bros. Inc. and Anderson Bros. Inc.

When LUBA ruled it lacked jurisdiction in the challenge, the businesses filed suit in Multnomah County Circuit Court. They lost. A March 19 Oregon Supreme Court ruling upheld the City Council.

A local group called Citizens for Union Avenue, led by Rosalie Huss and John Baxter, then collected 51,444 signatures to reverse the name change by putting the issue on the May 1990 primary ballot. Signatures of 29,662 Portland voters were needed.

"The issue is City Hall, and the way they handled it. No way does City Hall have the right to take this name from us," Huss said.

Others feared a ballot measure on the issue would send out a negative message in terms of the commitment of the citizens of Portland to the whole area of civil rights.

"I think what people are really saying is, 'We don't want to be identified with a black person.'"

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— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

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