

Memphis May Finally Name City Street After King

By Adrian Sainz
The Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — In the more than four decades since the Rev. Martin Luther King was assassinated on the balcony of Memphis' Lorraine Motel, about 900 U.S. cities have named local streets for him. Memphis is not one of them, though there is a stretch of interstate bearing his name.

Now Memphis officials will consider a naming a key downtown street for the civil rights icon after years of inaction that some say reflects a sense of shame and denial in the city where he was cut down.

The proposal to rename nine blocks of Linden Avenue to Dr. Martin Luther King Avenue is expected to pass Thursday when it comes before the Memphis and Shelby County Land Use Control Board. As of Tuesday, the board hadn't received any comments opposing the honor for King, who was killed by assassin James Earl Ray on April 4, 1968.

Berlin Boyd, a former city councilman, came up with the proposal earlier this year while still in office and it easily passed. He predicts it will pass the land use board, with a naming ceremony expected to take place on April 4. The board has final say unless an appeal is filed within 10 days.

The street re-naming is being seen by many Memphians as a symbol that the city is taking steps to heal the wound caused by the assassination.

"It was something that had a place in my

heart for some time," Boyd told The Associated Press. "Here is a city where Martin Luther King's blood cries from the streets, and we don't have anything to pay tribute to him."

King came to Memphis to support a sanitation workers strike in 1968 in what became his final act as a civil rights leader. The National Civil Rights Museum is built at the site of the former Lorraine Motel, where King stayed while supporting the sanitation workers. A wreath marks the spot on the balcony where King was shot.

The Rev. James Netters, who marched with King and the sanitation workers as a city councilman, said he proposed naming a street for King in the early 1970s, but the City Council voted to dedicate a stretch of Interstate 240 to him instead.

Supporters say renaming Linden Avenue for King is more significant than the dedication of the interstate because the avenue is in the heart of the city's downtown and residents will have to use the avenue's name to give directions.

Netters, 84, said he does not know why another proposal did not appear before now, a sentiment echoed by many others.

"Memphis can't do enough," Netters said. "Any honor that we dedicate to him is very, very critical."

Kenneth Whalum, a school board member and Memphis native who was 12 years old when King was killed, said no street has been named after King because Memphis has been in a state of denial and depression over the assassination.

"Just as when you lose any loved one, you get depressed," Whalum said. "For the last 43 years we've hoped that the incident didn't happen. We wished it would disappear and go away."

Boyd chose Linden Avenue because he saw a sign with the street's name in a photo taken of a rally led by King. The avenue runs in front of the Clayborn Temple - where King rallied with members of the civil rights movement - and the FedExForum, the arena where the NBA's Memphis Grizzlies play their home games. It runs parallel to Beale Street, the famous

notes that Linden Avenue is not named after a real person, so no one will be offended that their family name is being stripped from the downtown avenue. The name honors Under the Linden Trees Boulevard, over which the Brandenburg Gate was built in Berlin, Germany.

Should the proposal pass, Memphis would be added to the long list of cities, both big and small, that honor King with a street name. About 75 percent of the roughly 900 cities are found in 10 Southern states, with Georgia leading the way, said Derek Alderman, an East Carolina University geography professor who penned a 2006 study, "Naming Streets for Martin Luther King Jr.: No Easy Road."

Next in line are Texas, Mississippi, Florida, Louisiana and Alabama.

Alderman says cities have endured heated debates over naming streets after King: A common dispute centers on whether to select a street that is in a predominantly black neighborhood, or one that cuts across racial boundaries and "embodies the message that King was preaching when he was alive."

Boyd said acknowledging King with his own street may be a symbol that Memphis is making strides in eliminating racial tensions and is finally dealing with King's death.

"We have to start embracing the heritage of our city," Boyd said. "Until we understand who we are as a city, we will always be left behind."

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Memphis tourist drag, and is near the offices of the local chapter of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the union that King came to Memphis to defend.

One of the advantages of choosing Linden Avenue is that no businesses will have to change their address with the name change, according to the land use board's report on the street re-naming.

The report, which recommends approval,

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