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Two Franklin High School students run across an overpass at Rainier Avenue South on their way to school.

Alan Berner / Seattle Times

Street-name issue far from settled

Black community, merchants farther apart than ever

Lee Moriwaki
Times staff reporter

The story begins where the feet begin, in the heart of Seattle's Central Area.

It starts as a quiet, tree-lined road in an area that has long been home to much of the city's black population. As it heads north, it gets wider, straighter, busier.

Past the hillside gardens of Japanese refugees, past the ethnic architecture of Franklin High School, down into the commercial sector of South Seattle, it finally, to the industrial belt at the south city limits.

This is Martin Luther King Jr. Way. The street signs don't say so yet, however. They bear the name they have had for decades: Empire Way.

To many Central Area and Rainier Valley citizens, the change of name is an important tribute to a man, a dream, an ideal.

But to others, the switch is a superficial and ill-considered use of taxpayer dollars.

It's a difference of opinion that suggests a more significant rift in the community. While opponents to the name change

say the dire economy has prompted their concern, proponents have another name for it: racism.

The issue has drawn an outpouring of sentiment on both sides — petitions asking for the name change bore 4,100 signatures, petitions opposing it carried 3,000.

It has been a month and a half since Mayor Charles Royer approved the ordinance renaming Empire Way in honor of Dr. King, the slain civil-rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

But the controversy shows no sign of abating as city officials await a court ruling that will determine if and when the first new street signs can go up.

"Honoring our heroes is one way in which we keep the spirit of our city alive," Mayor Royer said as he signed the Martin Luther King Jr. ordinance, unanimously passed by the City Council.

But if the city's spirit were to be judged today by the debate over the street renaming, it would have to be described as fractured, at best.

The Empire Way Merchants Association, claiming the public

was denied a right to vote on the name, has filed a lawsuit to block the renaming. A hearing is scheduled Friday in King County Superior Court.

In the meantime, the city has held up manufacture of the signs. But the new signs will go up in October, unless the court rules otherwise, said Ruth Mortenson, of the Engineering Department.

While the city awaits the outcome of litigation, demonstrators have taken to the streets. Each Saturday for the past month, a small group has turned out to picket some of the opponents' business establishments. A group calling itself the Coalition for Respect has called for a boycott of merchants opposed to retaining Empire Way after Dr. King.

And the merchants, who previously had complained the name change would cost them thousands of dollars in business expenses, have hired a public-relations agent to help tell their side of the story.

The rhetoric is changing, too, from Royer and City Councilman George Benson's eloquent references to Dr. King's legacy of peace, justice and nonviolence, to a torrent of accusatory "they's."

Example: "They just do want no 'igaboo sign in front their buildings," one supporter of the street renaming said in an interview up the way the merchants' opposition is being cast in some quarters of the black community.

Example: "My Lord, he many things do they want?" Th from an opponent of the name change, when she learned the location of the Martin Luther King Early Childhood Education Center.

Proponents and opponents alike worry about the specter of racism in the controversy.

"I think that's the underlying issue. We do have problems here in Seattle. This is a clear indication of it," said Christopher J. Bennett, publisher of The Mediaman, a black-owned newspaper here.

The merchants deny racial charges.

"We do not want this to be up into a racial issue. We do not feel it's a racial problem. After all, these people are the neighbors of the merchants, and

See KING ON A TD

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Issues

Regarding the controversy over changing the name of Empire Way to Martin Luther King Jr. Way, I am quite sympathetic to the merchants for the time and cost they will have to expend for the address change on advertising, stationery, addresses of clients on computer programs, etc. However, we certainly should honor Martin Luther King Jr., who promoted humanitarian values to make America a better place in which to live.

I propose that we name one of our three major bridges as Martin Luther King Jr. Bridge instead. This could be the 520 Bridge, the I-50 Bridge, or the new West Seattle Bridge currently under construction. Since there are no merchants doing business on the bridge, the problem of address changes would not exist. A bridge is a very appropriate symbol to memorialize the great work Martin Luther King Jr. did in bridging the gap between racial groups and in promoting peace. There would probably be more people driving over such a bridge than on Empire Way, and these would be reminded of Martin Luther King Jr., on a daily basis.

— David H. Chan,
328 N.E. Serpentine Pl., Seattle

Taxpayer dollars are issue

I think it is marvelous that a street will be named after Martin Luther King Jr., but why 'Empire Way'? It is ridiculous to waste the taxpayers' dollars. I think it is appalling that the big chunk taken out of many hard-earned paychecks will be spent changing street signs and city maps.

Charles Royer was elected mayor because the people felt he was best able to represent them. Then why weren't the people consulted before he signed the ordinance? I think it is obvious they should have thought again before electing Charles Royer.

I am not a bigot because I am against renaming Empire Way. In fact I think the people who are accusing the opposers of being bigots are more aware of the color of their skin than the opposers are. The color of a person's skin is not the issue. The issue is how the taxpayers' dollars are being spent.

Why not name a community center or a street that has not yet been named after Martin Luther King Jr.? That, to me, is much more logical.

— Celeste Fayette,
Box 323, Hobart



STREET NAME

Landmark would be better way to honor

It appears that the debate over changing the name of Empire Way to Martin Luther King Jr. Way will continue for some time to come. That is, unless someone comes up with a better solution.

Those in favor of the change argue that Martin Luther King Jr. should be honored for his many great deeds and for his dreams and ideals. Any costs incurred should have no bearing on the matter. Points well taken, in my view.

However, those opposed to such a change argue that the costs are ill-timed. And, taking into account the economy as it is, argue rightfully so. I certainly wouldn't want to "foot the bill" that the merchants in the affected area will have to absorb. Also, there are many other areas in which Seattle should better use its monies.

So, let's compromise. Let's find some thing else to name after Mr. King. Why not re-name the Kingdome? It could be called The Martin Luther King Jr. Dome (Kingdome for short). Here is a place that people of all races gather together and enjoy many different activities in harmony. Would not that be a better tribute to Mr. King?

Think about it. I certainly won't consider it a greater honor to have "one of a kind" landmark named after me than one of a thousand streets in the city. The confusion and expense would certainly be minimized.

The idea is the best that I have here (not my idea, though I wish it were). Maybe it's not the best answer, but it's quite being so negative and start looking for a solution to the problem. As I see it, if a person doesn't have an alternative suggestion they don't have room to complain.

— Patrick A. Egf
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