

Road renaming sparks ire

BY JOSEPH R. SCHWARTZ
ASSISTANT UNIVERSITY EDITOR

May 27 — Chapel Hill citizens of every ilk gathered Monday at the town council meeting to express their feelings — be it through loud proclamations, applause, stickers and even tears — on renaming Airport Road to Martin Luther King Road.

Chapel Hill Town Council member Edith Wiggins proposed the change as a means to honor King and promote his message of unity and equality, but several citizens claimed that the issue is dividing the town as clearly as black and white.

More than 20 citizens signed up to speak, including residents and business owners of Airport Road and members of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Several people donned stickers that read, "Preserve History — Save Airport Road."

Jan Cosby was the first to approach the podium and set the tone for the fervent debate by challenging the council directly and displaying outrage at the process that several called "under the radar." "I'd like to remind all of you that you have been elected to represent all the people of Chapel Hill, not just some."

Becky Johnson, 34, a lifetime Airport Road resident followed, uttering only a few words before succumbing to tears. Her sister fin-

ished the emotionally charged prepared statements. "Why and how will this really honor Dr. King? A road is just a way to get from point A to point B," the statement read. "We are looking for frivolous ways to spend taxpayers' dollars."

Council members have estimated that changing the signage would cost at least \$16,000. Business owners said that renaming the road and changing business cards, letterhead and signage would be devastating.

But Charlie Kast, parish minister at the Community Church of Chapel Hill, was the first person at the forum to support the change. "To name this road after him is the very least we can do. The cost and inconvenience of this is small in consideration of the price he had to pay."

His remarks drew cheers from the large black contingent. After several such outbursts, Mayor Kevin Foy requested that people abstain from clapping, evoking a resounding, "thank you" from those against the renaming.

Other citizens referenced the importance of having such a dedication to King in the current political and social climate.

Stephen Deer, who works for People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, said that he felt compelled to speak after roughly \$3,500 of computer equipment was stolen that very day from his office. "I see a



Town Council member Edith Wiggins looks fatigued at a May meeting of the group, which considered whether to rechristen Airport Road.

connection between crime and our values," he said. "And I see naming a road 'Martin Luther King Road' as a proclamation of our values."

But such values were called into question in an anonymous letter submitted to all council members. The letter called King an adulterer, stating, "King is by far the most overrated American in our history."

Council member Mark Kleinschmidt, who resides on Airport Road, called it cowardly.

He said he isn't concerned about changing his address because the

delay in making the change will allow him to notify people.

While he acknowledged that the process has been unlike typical Chapel Hill proceedings, as thoughtful debate has been replaced by unruly shouting matches, he said the town will overcome the atmosphere of contentiousness.

"We will heal over this; it's not going to be something that will permanently scar the community."

Contact the City Editor at citydesk@unc.edu.

Road-naming debate follows national trends

Geographer: Furor isn't surprising

BY VIRGINIA WOOTEN
STAFF WRITER

June 3 — The debate in Chapel Hill over renaming Airport Road in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. follows a line of similar struggles in towns and cities across the nation.

Derek Alderman, a cultural geographer at East Carolina University, has extensively studied the politics behind naming streets in honor of King and said that the events in Chapel Hill are not unprecedented.

At least 650 towns and cities in the United States have streets named in King's honor, 30 of them in North Carolina. "Naming streets for King has proven to be controversial in many places inside and outside North Carolina," he said.

He pointed to High Point as a prime example of the struggles such a proposal causes within a community. Factions within the city have been trying to name a street for King for over a decade.

According to High Point Council member Bernita Sims, advocates have repeatedly changed the location of the proposed street after encountering obstacles such as the state government, the local university and retirement homes whose elderly populations can't afford the processes it would take to change their address.

Some towns also opt for compromise by naming only part of a proposed street after King.

Such was the case in Greenville, where only part of a major street was changed, due to resistance from business and residential interests, as well as ECU.

Zephyrhills, Fla., renamed a street for King, but after a change in political composition the town council reversed the decision. The

signs remain as an honorary dedication, but the official address was restored to its original name.

"In some ways, these struggles are like an X-ray. They really expose division within communities," Alderman said.

"The fact that you have such a progressive sophisticated place such as Chapel Hill, and the fact that this street naming issue is controversial really still speaks to the many different ways that people identify with King."

He feels confident that most Chapel Hill residents respect King and his memory, but that the issue lies in to what extent people personally identify with his legacy.

Alderman attended the May 24 Chapel Hill Town Council meeting at which citizens voiced their opinions on the proposed renamings, saying that the Chapel Hill debate is unique.

"One of the things that I saw that was pretty important when I attended the public hearing last week is that there does seem to be some strong, very vocal, white support for renaming the street for King. You don't always see that in more conservative towns," he said.

Alderman believes that these street naming struggles can be healthy for a town because they open up dialogue.

"It forces people to talk about race ... to talk about where America is in relation to what King was striving to build," he said.

"King was not the only person who advocated civil rights, but his face, his name, his image have become almost a metaphor for talking about the larger movement for civil rights."

Contact the City Editor at citydesk@unc.edu.

Fatigued Town Council passes new changes

BY JOSEPH R. SCHWARTZ
ASSISTANT UNIVERSITY EDITOR

Monday's Chapel Hill Town Council meeting was one of stark contrast, beginning with a heated forum that yielded a committee for further input and prompting mundane discussions that spurred immediate action.

The meeting opened to a packed house filled with concerned citizens, police officers and television news crews. After passionate debate and a vote to create a special committee for the proposed renaming of Airport Road, the room emptied and a clamor followed the crowds of people into the chamber halls.

The absence of the crowd didn't mean an absence of agenda items to be considered. Three more pub-

lic forums followed and the council approved the 2004-05 budget along with modifications to the UNC development plan and additions to the UNC softball complex.

After a brief discussion, the council approved UNC's plans to build a 130,000-square-foot physicians' building; to make additions to Morehead Planetarium, Fetzer Gym and to University property on Franklin Street; to relocate the proposed science complex chiller plant to the future Bell Tower parking deck; and to create a pedestrian bridge over South Road.

UNC officials who requested the change at a May 24 meeting agreed to all of the amendments, including a provision allowing for installation of a light railway if needed.

The council also gave clearance for UNC to construct additions to the softball field, including restroom facilities and dressing rooms.

In contrast to the 18 citizens who spoke on the Airport Road issue, only three people commented on the proposed lobbying ordinance that would limit citizens' ability to speak with council members.

Those who did speak said that the ordinance is too large scale, and instead of fixing a small problem it will cause far more large problems. "Focus your target, get a smaller aim, and use a smaller brush," said Charlie Fisher, chairman of the Government Relations Committee.

The council elected to discuss

the issue at a later date.

Council members' energy dwindled during the four hour meeting. Mayor Kevin Foy, worn out from the earlier debate, brushed off a request from members of the Orange County Visitors Bureau for more funding: "I'm not in a mood to reconsider the budget right now."

Several items on the agenda were passed over after council members motioned to recess them to the June 30 meeting.

Issues include a land-use plan amendment to identify the possible school site locations and a provision to the library Internet use policy.

Contact the City Editor at citydesk@unc.edu.

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