

Group eyes renaming as part of larger issue

BY JENNIFER FAIR AND ADAM W. RHEW
STAFF WRITERS

Members of a committee imbued with power to change the name of Airport Road took on broad issues during their first meeting Friday.

After months of deliberation and setbacks, the Special Committee to Consider Renaming Airport Road finally began its work.

And committee members highlighted area race relations as the larger issue of which the potential renaming of Airport Road in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. is only a part.

"Although we will work toward a recommendation, we will work with issues that are much bigger than renaming a road," said facilitator Graig Meyer.

Last month, the town hired four facilitators from OpenSource Leadership Strategies Inc. to ensure that the committee's meetings go smoothly.

The group's first meetings, which lasted eight hours on Friday and continued for another eight on Saturday, included large and small group discussions between the facilitators and 19 of the committee members.

Committee member Sheila A. Mikhail, who owns a business on Airport Road, unexpectedly had to leave town and was unable to attend the meeting.

In small group meetings on Friday, committee members were asked to discuss three topics: reasons for renaming Airport Road, reasons against renaming the road and other options to honor King.

Celebrating King's legacy was a common reason members cited for wanting to rename the road.

"If this community really is committed to (King's) values, then we should raise them up," said Yonni Chapman, a UNC graduate student and an expert on the area's history.

Local history and financial concerns were popular reasons members gave to explain why Airport Road should not be renamed.

Other reasons included a loss of racial privilege and a loss of control over the name of a place where people live and work.

Suggestions for alternatives to renaming the road ranged from dedicating the library in honor of

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CHUCK STONE, UNC PROFESSOR AND COMMITTEE MEMBER

King to renaming the University after him.

But it was clear that renaming a road was not the issue on the minds of many committee members.

"No matter how hard we try, we cannot erase that this is a racial issue," said Brenda Brown, a citizen at large on the committee.

The afternoon began with what facilitators called a kiva conversation.

Chairs were arranged in three circles, and the members were asked to sit according to race. The groups rotated so that each group spoke twice.

Committee members responded to a prompt to speak about the connection between race relations and renaming Airport Road.

A group consisting only of black committee members consistently said racial divisions still exist in Chapel Hill.

"Race matters," said Mayor Pro Tem Edith Wiggins. "There is this myth that Chapel Hill functions at a higher level of understanding. Race matters even in Chapel Hill."

Another group, which consisted only of white people, was divided on the proposal.

Catherine Holland, who owns a business on Airport Road, said she thinks that the renaming is being forced on people and that there are other ways to honor King that would not be as invasive.

But council member Sally Greene said the road would bring attention to King's distinct connection to Chapel Hill.

"I think it's deplorable that I've lived here 17 years and it wasn't until recently that I heard about (King speaking at UNC during the 1960s)," she said.

The final group, which consisted of members of both races, brought up several different points.

Creighton Irons, a UNC senior and a member of the group, weighed the renaming by considering how he would feel if Franklin Street were renamed to honor King.

"In the end, I would still go to changing the name of that," he said. "My kids will know it as Martin Luther King, and I can tell them that it is used to be Franklin and why it was changed, and that will mean even more."

Brenda Brown reminded her fellow committee members that without King, black people wouldn't have had the right to speak on this issue.

"Honoring the road after Dr. King would be the greatest honor you could bestow on Chapel Hill," she said.

During the group's break after the kiva conversation, committee member Chuck Stone left.

Stone, a University professor who knew King, said he was frustrated with the process. He did not attend Saturday's meeting.

"I've been in the civil rights movement," he said. "I don't want to relive all this 40 years later."

After listening to comments from the public, the committee had a large group discussion of what it means to be a racist and what exactly the sacrifice of renaming the road would be.

Several members made it clear that they do not believe that those opposed to the renaming are racist — but they said racism does play a part in the renaming debate.

"We're opening up a wound that has never healed," said Bishop L. Gene Hatley. "It has a scab on it, and now the scab has been peeled off."

When the group ended its Friday discussion at 4 p.m., facilitator Graig Meyer said the group had experienced some discomfort — something the facilitators considered important in the process — and had addressed some of the deeper issues underlying the change.

"You have to accept nondecisive (conclusions)," Meyer said. "It may not be one answer."

Contact the City Editor at citydesk@unc.edu.

Road, airport crafted history

BY CATHERINE SHAROKY
STAFF WRITER

During the 11 months of controversy over the potential renaming of Airport Road to honor Martin Luther King Jr., many people have stressed the importance of Airport Road in the town's history.

Though the exact history of the road is hard to define, some point out that it is simply connected to the history of its namesake — the Horace Williams Airport.

"The connection between the University, airport and Airport Road itself is a historically significant one," said Jonathan Howes, former Chapel Hill mayor and current special assistant to the chancellor for local relations. "(Airport Road) wouldn't have been named that if there hadn't been an airport there."

Since its construction in 1928, the airport has been a historical landmark in Chapel Hill.

Stunt fliers, parachute jumps and \$1 plane rides were advertised in the Chapel Hill Weekly in the 1930s. During the summer, air shows were popular community attractions.

"In those days, a couple hundred people would turn out and kids would ride bicycles out and horses out," said Doug Eyre, a local historian. "We had an airport, and everyone wanted to see the air shows and watch the planes."

The airport's name was set in 1941 when UNC philosophy Professor Horace Williams made the University the sole heir to his real estate fortune.

"I give to the University of North Carolina all my property of every description and all of it," Williams' will stated. "The property is to be held in trust forever."

While the income from his estate went to University fellowships, 400 bequeathed acres of property were used to expand the airport, which was then renamed in his honor.

Eyre said the road was commonly referred to as the airport road since 1928 simply because it was the road that led to the airport. When street signs were formalized in the 1960s, the road already was well known as Airport Road.

The airport's growing popularity led to construction on the road itself in 1941, when 20 of the road's 23 curves were straightened out.

In 1941, the University received a federal grant from the Works Progress Administration that helped build new runways and hangars.

The money helped fund a Navy preflight training program at the airport during World War II.

According to the Chapel Hill Weekly, more than 120 people applied for the 50 flight positions. Howes said former President

George H.W. Bush and Baseball Hall of Fame outfielder Ted Williams were enlisted in the program.

"This state, with its Wright Brothers tradition, has always been air-minded," stated a letter from former University president Frank Porter Graham to Naval officer Lt. Leslie Parkinson in 1943. "I think that when the war is over, we are in a position to go right ahead with our program of building ... one of the finest departments of aeronautics anywhere in the United States."

Though Graham's wishes might not have come true, Horace Williams Airport continues to hold prominence as the location for Medical Air Operations, the transportation facet of the N.C. Area Health Education Centers program.

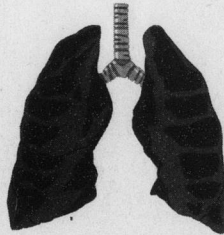
But the future of both entities is in doubt with the looming possibility of Airport Road's being renamed and the airport's being demolished to make way for the University's Carolina North satellite campus.

"I agree that there are a lot of things in our history and that each of them has a different level of significance for each of us," said Chapel Hill Mayor Kevin Foy. "But it is a fact that the airport has played a role of history in this town."

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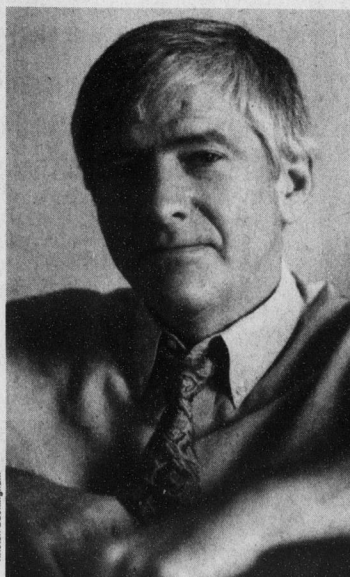
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