

Excerpt from Draft Minutes of the Chapel Hill Town Council Meeting of April 19, 2004:

**Item 1 - Public Forum to Consider the Renaming of
Airport Road to Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard**

• **Introduction by the Manager.**

Town Engineering Director George Small explained that this item had been initiated by a request from the local chapter of the NAACP. The Town Council had then asked its Naming Committee to ascertain any relevant issues and determine whether the request could be accommodated through state regulations, he said. Mr. Small explained that the Committee had returned a report suggesting that renaming Airport Road would be feasible and the Council had then scheduled this public forum to receive comments on the idea. Mr. Small noted that the Council's packet included information regarding the process for naming state roads as honorariums and about other efforts around the country to rename streets in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He recommended that Council members receive comments and refer them to the Naming Committee to bring back for Council action at a later date.

• **Comments from citizens.**

Marie Weiden suggested that the road be named after Howard Lee, since it would be better and less confusing to honor a local, living person. Dr. King probably would agree with her, she said.

Bruce Johnson, who has lived on Airport Road for sixty-four years and five months, told Council members that his grandfather had once owned a farm there. Mr. Johnson has three pieces of property on that road, he said, and they include a garage, his home, and his daughter's residence. He said that his business revenues had been down about 35% this year and that the last thing he needed was to incur more cost. Mr. Johnson recounted how Navy pilots had trained at the Horace Williams Airport during World War II. He was not against the proposed new name per se, Mr. Johnson explained, but he did not want the name of Airport Road to be changed at all.

Airport Road resident Mary Louise Cowdrick read from her March 22, 2004 letter to the Town Manager. She asked that copies of that letter be forwarded to the Mayor and Town Council. Ms. Cowdrick expressed concern about increasing taxes and stated that she does not get much in return, since she lives alone, has no family in the local schools, and commits no crimes. She explained that she and her neighbors take care of their own property and are no expense to the Town. Ms. Cowdrick asked the Town Council to consider the situation of residential taxpayers with an Airport Road address who must pay increasing taxes even though their income is diminishing.

Ms. Cowdrick told Council Members that she was 83 years old. It would take her "forever and a day to get all of this accomplished" if the Town changes the name of Airport Road, she said. Ms. Cowdrick described the proposed change as unnecessary harassment and said that it was an ill-conceived and non-productive proposal. "If it ain't broke, don't try to fix it," she said, suggesting that the Council use this old adage as their guide. Ms. Cowdrick remarked that

Airport Road had become a "racetrack." That would not be a proper memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr., she said, and she suggested that a public park or playground would truly honor him. Ms. Cowdrick asked Council Members to reject this "ill-advised, totally irrelevant proposal."

Airport Road resident Dave Walker expressed opposition to changing the name. He emphasized that he was not a racist, noting that he had two black grandchildren whom he loved and was helping to put through college. He had been a business man in Chapel Hill for 30 years, he said, and had always gotten along well with his Black associates. But, Mr. Walker said, he objected to the change for the sake of everyone who lives along Airport Road. There had been no good reason offered for changing the name, he said. Mr. Walker told Council members that he had also opposed putting the planting area down the middle of Airport Road. But it had been put in anyway and it inconveniences him every time he leaves his home, he said. Mr. Walker stated that not one Council member had been affected by that because none of them live or own businesses on Airport Road. And no Council member would be affected by the name change either, Mr. Walker said.

Mark Cares explained that he had traveled much around the country over the past ten years. Most major cities that he had seen had a Martin Luther King, Jr. Highway or Drive, he said. Mr. Cares stated that once the Town dedicates a road to Martin Luther King and his memory it will be very difficult to change anything associated with that road. He suggested that the Town Council think about whether they could approach the NAACP a few years from now and propose changes.

Charlie Zimmerli proposed that the Council change the name of Estes Drive rather than Airport Road. A six lane highway did not actually honor the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., he said, proposing that the site should be a more contemplative kind of space. Mr. Zimmerli reviewed the history of Airport Road and predicted that the Airport would be there in the future. But, Estes Drive had been named after a member of the Cobb family, he said, pointing out that other areas in Town carry that family's name as well. Mr. Zimmerli noted that Estes Drive "goes right through the heart of this community." He described how it starts in a public housing community, passes by University Mall, the Chamber of Commerce, the Post Office, the Town Library, a firehouse, two schools, Carolina North, and ends up in Carrboro. Mr. Zimmerli suggested that South Estes Drive, Estes Drive, and Estes Drive Extension were all calling out to be renamed to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Chapel Hill resident Eric Plow, who described himself as a civil rights activist, stated that renaming a road was not the right way to honor Dr. King, pointing out that nearly every town in the country has a road named after him. Mr. Plow commented that it would be nice 200 years from now to be reminded that there used to be an Airport in Town, and suggested finding another way to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.

Chapel Hill resident Fred Battle stated that "Blacks have some investment in Airport Road also." Noting the many civil rights actions in the 50 years since Brown vs. Board of Education, Mr. Battle said, "it hardens my heart to see that this type of attitude still exists in the community." Whenever there is an attempt to name something after a Black the first thing citizens look at is

the cost, Mr. Battle remarked. "What about the price that has been paid," he asked. "That man gave his life for civil rights and the freedom that we now enjoy."

Mr. Battle told members of the audience that Airport Road did not belong only to them, but to everyone. He stated that nothing on the east side of Chapel Hill had been named after Blacks unless it was in a low-income housing area. Mr. Battle described the east side of Town as the "white side" and expressed contempt for what he perceived as the attitude of tonight's speakers. He asked Council members to name Airport Road after Martin Luther King, Jr. "If a business is in such jeopardy that doing this will cause it to fail then that business already was lost to start with," Mr. Battle said.

Michelle Laws told Council members that naming Airport Road after Martin Luther King, Jr. would be a symbolic gesture that would encompass the contributions of other local civil rights leaders, such as Howard Lee, as well. Martin Luther King's life and legacy epitomize the qualities and character of so many great leaders, black and white, who helped make Chapel Hill a town that everyone loves and respects, she said. Ms. Laws agreed that streets named for Martin Luther King, Jr. had become commonplace around the country. But those roads are often surrounded by blight, abandoned buildings, dilapidated housing and crime, she pointed out. "Oh, what a wonderful gesture and example that Chapel Hill can once again set by naming one of its main thoroughfares, which is linked to one of the most prestigious universities in the world and runs all the way through one of the best towns in the world, after Dr. King," Ms. Laws said.

Chapel Hill resident Stephen Dear expressed pride in Chapel Hill for considering naming Airport Road after Martin Luther King, Jr. He was surprised to hear the idea described as irrelevant, he said, and also surprised to hear some say there was no good reason for doing this. At a time when the country is facing war for years to come and the state is facing more than 600 homicides a year, "we need Dr. King and we need to proclaim his values," said Mr. Dear. "Our children are the best reason I can think of to be naming this important road after Dr. King." Mr. Dear predicted that the road would grow in significance. In naming it after Dr. King the Town would proclaim its values and proclaim what is best in all of us, he said. Mr. Dear expressed gratitude to the NAACP and others who had brought the proposal. He described it as a brilliant idea and said that he would be proud of Chapel Hill if it did this.

Chapel Hill resident Al McSurely said that Dr. King had begun to change during the last few years of his life and had wondered how he had come to be a bigger symbol than he thought he deserved. Mr. McSurely told Council members about his personal experience as a civil rights activist and about conversations he'd had with Dr. King in the 1960s. Dr. King had discussed his vision of moving the struggle forward and taking 50,000 people to Washington and shutting the Capital down until the country came to grips with its racist history and the way it exploits poor people in general, Mr. McSurely recalled.

Mr. McSurely noted that Dr. King had been killed in April 1968 before being able to accomplish that march on Washington. He asked what meaning it would have for the people of Chapel Hill to put this name/symbol on street signs. "It means it's a crossroads. It means we are making a commitment to rectify our past history," he said. Mr. McSurely pointed out that having this new symbol in Chapel Hill coming right down the middle and cutting through the heart of Town

would mean making a new commitment. "We'll be reminded every day of this man and what he meant to this nation," he pointed out.

Chapel Hill resident Nancie McDermott said that she was happy and proud of the "beautiful idea" of taking Martin Luther King's name, and therefore his legacy, and ideas, and the spirit of justice and peaceful change, and putting that front and center on signs on I-40 that would direct people into Chapel Hill. She loved the image of this road going right down the middle of Chapel Hill, she said, adding that it was a wonderful thing to be able to tell her children about. Ms. McDermott noted that Dr. King had changed the world, the country, the South, Burlington and High Point where she grew up, and Chapel Hill. She remembers seeing segregated rest rooms and water fountains when she was a child, she said. "One sweet thing about Dr. King's legacy is that that's not something I had to explain to my children, with shame or with heartbreak." Ms. McDermott remarked that she could not imagine having to tell a child that they could not enter places where other children are.

Ms. McDermott pointed out that the community had a chance to make a statement with this renaming. She noted that even though there was an airport in Town there also had been segregation in Chapel Hill and all over the south. "Making this change would say what matters to us as a people and would say that we care and we remember, and we're changed by the words wisdom and lessons of Martin Luther King, Jr." Ms. McDermott stated that there had never been a greater need for non-violent solutions to conflict and that Dr. King's ways and methods have much to say to people today. Making the change would mean saying, "we cherish justice, we cherish peaceful change, we cherish peace and freedom for all people," she said.

Brenda Brown said that Dr. King was and is an inspiration and that changing the name of Airport Road to Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard would be a small gesture compared to Dr. King's work. "But what an honor it would be if the Town would do that," she said.

Mayor pro tem Wiggins pointed out that no one had suggested naming the road MLK Boulevard, as some speakers had referred to it. Dr. King's full name would be used if the Town were to proceed with the renaming, she said. Mayor pro tem Wiggins then asked Mr. Small to describe exactly where Airport road begins and ends. Mr. Small replied that it begins by the fire station by North Street and proceeds to the northern city limits at the south side of I-40.

Chapel Hill resident Eugene Farrar stated that he had grown up on Airport Road and had traveled on it for 60 years. To name that road after Dr. King would represent what Dr. King stood for, he said, noting that Dr. King had fought for all people, not just African Americans. When a person gives his life for something he believes in then it is a small thing to change a name in his honor, Mr. Farrar said. He pointed out that Martin Luther King, Jr. had changed the world and had taught that "without followship there's no leadership and where there's good leadership there's good followship." Mr. Farrar told Council members that he had brought this issue up before a forum of candidates for Town Council, and "99.9% of you who ran" had agreed with changing the name. He was here today to see that change come about and to see Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized as a great leader, Mr. Farrar said.

Chapel Hill resident Bill Thorpe told Council members that this issue was very dear to his heart. He had not directly lobbied the Council, he said, because he knew they would do the right thing. Mr. Thorpe presented a petition from Chapel Hill residents along the current Martin Luther King, Jr. Road. They had consented to give up that name so that it could be given to Airport Road, he explained. Mr. Thorpe said that he had told those people that they probably would be allowed to participate in choosing their new street name. He asked the Town Council to look favorably upon the petition to rename Airport Road.

- **Comments and questions from the Mayor and Town Council.**

Mayor pro tem Wiggins explained that all of this evening's comments and questions would be referred to the Manager and Attorney, and possibly to the Naming Committee. Then this issue would come back as an agenda item for Council action on May 24, 2004, she said.

Council Member Verkerk remarked that there was a "little stumbling block" for her with this issue because she does not like the idea of erasing a part of history with the removal of Airport Road's name. She asked the Naming Committee members to explain why Airport Road had been chosen and if other roads, such as NC 54, had been discussed. Council Member Ward recalled that Airport Road had been the first choice of the Naming Committee and the NAACP. Council Member Greene added that the Committee had honored and embraced the idea that Airport Road comes down through the middle of Town. Council Member Ward pointed out that there already was an Airport Drive, and that there might be opportunities to turn that into a more major road as things develop north of Town.

Council Member Kleinschmidt pointed out that the Committee had also considered Weaver Dairy Extension. He noted that he lives on Airport Road, adding that this was relevant only because one speaker had said that no one on the Council lives there. Council Member Kleinschmidt suggested holding tonight's public forum open to make sure there is adequate notification even though it was hard to imagine, he said, that anyone had not heard about this. Council Member Kleinschmidt wondered if the Council should send notices to everyone on Airport Road to ensure that no one felt left out of the process.

At Council Member Strom's request, Mr. Small explained the process for filing an address change at the Post Office. He noted that residents have up to a year to accomplish the change. Council Member Strom said that he did not feel compelled to give notice to everyone on Airport Road since there had been a broad public discussion about this for a long time. And, people have a year to use up their stationery and letterhead and make the change, he said. Council Member Strom acknowledged that some would clearly be inconvenienced. But, given the opportunity to do something so meaningful, that would be a reasonable tradeoff, he said.

Mayor pro tem Wiggins pointed out that the Council could determine the effective date. That would give businesses and residents time to plan, she said. Council Member Ward asked what had been done to date in terms of notification. Mr. Small replied that the staff had sent mail to ten or so people who had previously sent correspondence to the Town. The staff had also placed ads in the newspaper, he said.

Council Member Ward expressed support for the idea of sending notices to residents along Airport Road. This is a courtesy that the Town can easily extend, he said, and the Council should make the extra effort before an action is taken.

Mayor pro tem Wiggins ascertained from Mr. Horton that a mailing could go out with relative ease and little expense. Council Member Harrison inquired about postcard mailings, but Mr. Horton recommended that the Town provide citizens with a little more information in this case. Council Member Harrison agreed that residents should be notified, since renaming creates a potential inconvenience. He asked if this would go through the DOT Board's Road and Bridge Naming Committee. Mr. Small replied that he thought it would go directly to Sandy Nance and that there would be no impediments to the process. Council Member Harrison commented that his mailing address was in Durham even though he lives in Chapel Hill. Getting an address change could be quite inconvenient, he said, and he suggested that Council members keep that in mind during the decision-making process.

Council Member Hill remarked that this discussion had become focused early and that there had not been much opportunity to discuss options. He characterized as inappropriate some of the earlier remarks by tonight's speakers. Council Member Hill expressed interest in Mr. Zimmerli's suggestion about Estes Drive and asked that someone from the Committee explain why that was not being considered. Council Member Greene replied that current plans for Carolina North called for a rerouting of Estes Drive into the campus. So the Committee had concluded that it probably would not be a continuous street in the future, she explained.

Council Member Greene pointed out that Martin Luther King's life had been cut short, leaving unfinished business. That had been reflected in some of the emotion expressed tonight, she said. Council Member Greene thanked the NAACP for bringing the idea forward so that the Town could continue to pursue Dr. King's dream. Mayor pro tem Wiggins explained that Mr. Small had provided the Committee with a map of Chapel Hill's roads with the major thoroughfares highlighted. The Committee had discussed every one of those, she said, and NC 54 was the other major thoroughfare that they had considered. They then met with representatives of the NAACP and told them about the advantages and disadvantages of both roads, she explained. Mayor pro tem Wiggins said that everyone left that meeting committed to the Airport Road choice.

Council Member Verkerk asked why Airport Road had been the one chosen. Council Member Kleinschmidt replied that the question might be, "why not Airport Road?" It was hard to find a road in town without historic significance, he said, and here seemed to be a weak significance for Airport Road. Council Member Kleinschmidt noted that there already was an Airport Drive, which would increase in significance as Carolina North is developed. He had moved a lot, he said, so he knew that the least significant cost associated with moving is changing your address. So, cost and historic significance were weak reasons to not do this, Council Member Kleinschmidt said, and Airport Road is a major thoroughfare.

Council Member Verkerk mentioned that her mother was 89 years old. She understood how difficult it was for older people to make certain types of changes, she said, but said that these issues were not her main concern. "I want to know, why Airport Road?" Council Member Verkerk repeated, explaining that she was not against using Airport Road but just wanted more

information about why it had been chosen. Hearing why the local chapter of the NAACP had chosen it would increase everyone's understanding and comfort level, she said.

Mayor pro tem Wiggins replied that Council members who were on the Committee had expressed where they stand on this. They had considered another thoroughfare, she said, but the deciding factor had been the importance of Airport Road. Mayor pro tem Wiggins agreed that NC 54 was a major thoroughfare as well, but pointed out that it did not have the same profile in the life of this community as Airport Road. She proposed that Airport Road had been selected because it had such a high profile and was so special and important. "Now I understand," replied Council Member Verkerk.

Council Member Strom commented that the level of emotion on the Committee had grown as they considered options. "It was unanimous, and clear to us, that the prominent major thoroughfare in Town is Airport Road. And we felt like the principles, and the ethics, and the way Dr. King lived his life is emblematic of what we in Chapel Hill believe is important," he said. Council Member Strom said that it "just clicked, and we really did become passionate about it." He said that the Committee had discussed how many Martin Luther King, Jr. roads there were in the country and how naming another one seems 'passe'. "Shouldn't it be the park, or the aquatics center? Couldn't it be a school?" But the Committee had chosen Airport Road, and it was unanimous, he said, adding that he disagreed that Raleigh Road had the same symbolic strength as Airport Road.

Mayor pro tem Wiggins added that the Committee had been fortunate to have Council Member Greene as member, since she likes to do research and had gathered much information on the history of naming roads and other monuments for Dr. King. Most communities take the line of least resistance, said Mayor pro tem Wiggins, and they pick a street or road where there won't be much controversy. That is the easiest thing to do, but it has little significance other than just being a gesture, she said. So the Committee preferred Airport Road because it was not the easy choice, Mayor pro tem Wiggins said.

Council Member Greene held up a book entitled called Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America's Main Street. She commented that many of those streets were in poor black parts of Town where naming them after Dr. King had been easy to do. Some of them are on bypasses where no one has to change their address, she said, but the Committee wanted to take care to make the choice meaningful. Council Member Greene added that renaming Airport Road in this way would shift what the author of the book calls the center of gravity of Black America's Main Street. And the Committee had unanimously agreed that this is what Dr. King's legacy deserves, she said.

Council Member Hill remarked that the cost of changing people's stationery and checkbooks had never been an issue for him. That will happen wherever a street gets renamed, he pointed out. He merely wanted to be sure that this evolved from discussion rather than being a mandate, he said. Council Member Hill pointed out that many people do not like change and emphasized that the Committee should get its message out. He was convinced that this was a creative and good idea and that it would not be just the same thing that everybody else has done, he said. But he

would like to hear it announced and explained so that many people in the community would be convinced as well, said Council Member Hill.

Mayor pro tem Wiggins noted that if this passes it will be the Council's message as well. She suggested that the Committee meet again to review tonight's comments. Mayor pro tem Wiggins expressed hope that the Council's recommendation on May 24th would include recognition of some of these issues. That would help make this as smooth and easy a transition as possible if the Council takes this action on May 24th, she said. Mayor pro tem Wiggins suggested referring tonight's comments to the Naming Committee and then to the Manager and Attorney. Mr. Horton agreed to send notices to Airport Road residents.

- **Motion to recess Public Hearing to May 24, 2004.**

COUNCIL MEMBER KLEINSCHMIDT MOVED, SECONDED BY COUNCIL MEMBER GREENE, TO RECESS THE PUBLIC HEARING TO MAY 24, 2004. THE MOTION WAS ADOPTED UNANIMOUSLY (9-0).