

Preface

Members of the Task Force first want to acknowledge and thank City Council for being open and bold in agreeing to engage in this proposal for honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Through the months that we have researched and developed this proposal there have been numerous public debates, as well as internal debates. They have been challenging, enlightening and instructive in understanding our past, present and preparing us for the future. As best as we have been able, we have all tried to reflect upon and honor the work of Dr. King.

We also recognize the significant work and time that many on Council have devoted to this project. While many important decisions are before Council with much larger budgetary implications, we appreciate the attention that Council has provided this proposal. We have no doubt that this community discussion has been helpful within our city, that it is necessary, that it will continue for the better and that it represents the forward-thinking leadership of our city. Harrisonburg has a unique and significant place in Virginia's history as it relates to race and social justice; our diversity, vitality and tremendous growth are a testament to that. This work of honoring Dr. King should be yet another mark of distinction and pride for Harrisonburg that will be recognized across the state. Therefore, we want to again express our appreciation for embracing and participating in this effort.

Proposal to the Harrisonburg City Council

Rationale for the project

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. left an inspiring legacy of human rights, social justice, and non-violent social action as a means of respecting and honoring the humanity of all people. This legacy and vision continues to inspire many in our country and here in Harrisonburg. Choosing to honor King's legacy in Harrisonburg contributes toward owning up to past social and racial injustices here in the city, inspiring some level of healing from wrongdoing in and by our city, embracing the current demographic and increasing diversity of residents, and reminding one another of the shared work of honoring one another and all people groups. Toward this end, it is desired to honor Martin Luther King, Jr. with high visibility, in a setting that holds significance, while investing an acceptable amount for the impact of necessary changes.

I. Recommendation

After continued research and discussion of numerous possibilities for honoring the life and legacy of the late Martin Luther King, Jr. within the city of Harrisonburg, this task force has once again come to a clear consensus that the best possible location for this honor is **to rename Cantrell Avenue the *Martin Luther King, Jr. Way* and commemorate the current name with *Historic Cantrell Avenue* signage**. This approach seeks to both preserve history and broaden history for the well being of the city and her residents.

Why a street?

Martin Luther King, Jr. took his movement to the streets. It was in the public space of the streets that the people marched for civil rights and claimed their place in the community and society. Likewise, it was in the streets that the dominant culture and powers attempted to push back and silence those who were calling for justice. It is good and right for the honoring of Martin Luther King, Jr. to be realized with a street rather than some other public entity.

It is important to select a shared entity of significance, in the heart of the city, for naming rather than a building or bridge from one particular neighborhood. The street has no cultural or physical restrictions. It is shared equally by all citizens ... and visitors. It will not be limited to just those who might be more likely to use it (like a park or public building) or just to residents. It will be visible on maps, with directions people give, in addresses (particularly with our city's largest employer, James Madison University). It will be accessible for car, pedestrians and bicyclists. With the properly selected street, it can cross significant intersections and notable locations in the community.

Why a renaming vs. new street?

Renaming an existing street, rather than finding some new street or entity, asks something of us – individually and as a community. It costs something. And it should do so. There is a level of intentional sacrifice to demonstrate a symbolic reversal of past city and institutional policies – from the naming of public places to the segregation of public services. Further, sometimes through wrestling, disagreement and struggle, the inconveniences of renaming are weighed alongside the potential benefits. This requires careful thought, processing, problem solving, stakeholder outreach, community education and broader-based ownership for a shared community project. And this eventually benefits us all as Harrisonburg residents accepting and/or embracing change.

Renaming also requires us to reflect on history and our memories in a way a new street cannot. While many people may reflect on particular fond memories along an existing street which reflect their history, it will not be the history that everyone experienced. As with any place, the history along Cantrell reflects a different history for different people. While some reflect on playful childhood memories, others may reflect on the past segregation practices of Rockingham Memorial Hospital. Some may reflect on our previously segregated high school that was required to become our first integrated school.

In communities across the country, this is why supporters of Dr. King’s legacy have so often proposed street renaming as a way to honor Dr. King. It is true that the decision to rename a street is sometimes abandoned for “something else.” The reasons for this are many and sometimes reflect the complex discussions around race and history and sometimes reflect the desire to pursue a less challenging option. However, this can miss the greater opportunity for continued community discussion and reflection representative of the struggle and aspirations of Dr. King’s work.

Rationale for the merits of selecting Cantrell Avenue

Cantrell Avenue was selected because of its centrality and visibility mostly for local residents. It is a connecting street, near downtown and JMU, with high visibility in the very heart of the city. Being a significant artery, many city and county residents travel or cross sections of Cantrell Avenue daily thereby increasing the visual impact of honoring the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. with multiple signs. Even though this is a major street, there are fewer than expected physical addresses needing to be changed with the majority of address holders reporting being open to this change. Further, research has demonstrated that there is not a single, highly honorable history to the naming of this street. The name, Cantrell, has not had meaningful historical ties to families of the city or county. By contrast, Martin Luther King, Jr. is held in high esteem by a significant number of city residents and families as well as statewide and nationally.

Rationale for commemorating *Historic Cantrell Avenue*

Many people hold fond memories of living on, shopping at, walking or traveling Cantrell Avenue through the years. One beginning (or end) is at the old Harrisonburg High School, now Memorial Hall. It runs by the old Rockingham Memorial Hospital and the historic Madison College, now James Madison University. To commemorate the history this avenue holds in the hearts of many in the city, this street, with the new name of *Martin Luther King, Jr. Way* would be designated *Historic Cantrell Avenue* with signage under or beside each new sign. In so designating, the historic value of Cantrell Avenue would indeed be heightened rather than diminished. This is a form of both preserving and broadening history.

New educational opportunities for Harrisonburg residents

Likewise, renaming Cantrell Avenue the *Martin Luther King, Jr. Way* heightens the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and presents opportunities for city residents including educating our children and youth about King’s legacy and the civil rights movement; lifting the ideals of non-violence, dialogue and social action; inspiring dignity, peaceful co-existence and meaningful integration in the context of a growing multicultural population; upholding the values of social and economic justice and addressing issues such as racism and poverty. The Martin Luther King, Jr. “way” can inspire and inform our *way* of engaging one another both personally and civically as did Dr. King himself.

Probable costs and time frame

There are costs involved with renaming a street just as there are with routine replacement of signage. City management can provide actual figures. The projected cost for replacing a street sign is in the neighborhood of \$100. Business owners will also incur some cost in changing signage, letterhead, envelopes and business cards. These costs can be lessened if there is a 6-month or longer transitional period between any decision and implementation giving businesses time to use up and reorder letterhead, etc. There is said to be no additional cost for the postal service responding to a new address. Additional costs and limitations, such as updating maps, directions and GPS units, fall into the category of the ever present changes in our lives. The impact of updates and changes are of a reasonable level given the stated and perceived benefits to the community.

II. Other Possible Locations (with commentary)

New Downtown Park (Turner Pavilion, green space, parking area)

This yet to be developed park is in the center of the city. It offers high visibility as numerous events will be held there. Depending on the demographic of those who frequent this park, it has potential to become a place of significance as a gathering place for city residents. The updates and changes needed would be reasonable in scope. Possible hurdles include groups (farmer's market, Downtown Renaissance and the DN-R) already having a sense of ownership for this space resulting in competing ideas about naming (or renaming).

Harrisonburg High School (the current high school)

The high school is a significant shared entity with high visibility. The educational impact on high school students and the entire community is heightened. That said, this option is not likely to have adequate support from the current school board and City Council is not empowered to designate a name for a public school.

Expanded and Remodeled Municipal Building

This building represents the very center of civic power and administration. In this way, it has significance for city residents. It has high visibility for downtown traffic and also in symbolism. Naming this building for MLK, Jr. could serve as a conscience and inspiration for city administrators, staff and City Council members as decisions affecting city residents are made in this space. One downside is that this building, important as it is, does not currently serve as a place of the people. It holds memories of being a school and used as a confederate hospital.

Port Republic bridge (or stone spring bridge)

Naming a bridge appears to offer high visibility but, in reality, the signage is quite limited and often overlooked. Few people know, notice and/or recall the name of bridges unlike the names of streets. Unless the bridge is expansive and thereby notable, the significance of bridges being named is lacking. Naming a bridge gets initial headlines and then is soon largely forgotten except by those who owned the project. The possible exception is if signage is large and supported with flags, banners or statuary thereby increasing the visibility and significance for travelers by vehicle and foot. However, realistically there are no bridges in Harrisonburg, only overpasses. Overpasses are far less significant than bridges. People don't identify an overpass by its name in the way that they do significant and expansive bridges. An overpass does not meet the criteria of significant and highly visible.

Biking/Walking Pathway (Northend Greenway, Bluestone Trail, etc.)

This project presents as a shared entity with high visibility and this might indeed be the case depending on signage, usage and ownership, but it could also result in the name of MLK, Jr. being largely tucked away from the majority of city residents. Martin Luther King, Jr. took his movement to the streets. Other movements are leading the way for the development of biking/walking pathways throughout the city. It seems prudent for the naming of these pathways to symbolically represent the essence of the project. Further, names, such as the Northend Greenway and Bluestone Trail, have already thoughtfully and intentionally been attached to sections of the pathway.

Section of I-81

Naming a section of I-81 is one way of assuring high visibility when based solely on the amount of daily traffic but might lack significance for the local population. The mindset of interstate travel (passing through) is quite different than that of traveling daily on a local street. Reading signs on the interstate holds meaning at some level but lacks the impact of pondering seeing street signage throughout a city. The emphasis of this project is rightly placed on the local community.

New Elementary School (current Thomas Harrison Middle School building)

This option lacks adequate support from the current school board and City Council is not empowered to designate a name for a public school. Further, an elementary school serves only a portion of the city population rather than being a significant shared entity.

Other streets that have been suggested: Stone Spring/Erickson Connector, Main Street, Route 33

These streets, especially Main Street and Route 33, have high visibility and significance. However, there are many more address holders on these streets compared with Cantrell Avenue. The Stone Spring/Erickson connector is said to have already been named by City Council.

In closing, none of these other possible locations adequately meet the criteria for honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Harrisonburg community. Cantrell Avenue provides greater potential as a location that holds promise in impacting city and county residents with the life and ongoing legacy of MLK, Jr.

Respectfully submitted by the *Martin Luther King, Jr. Street Renaming/Naming Task Force*.

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