

Statement to the City Council, 11-19-19

I am Roy Ockert, and I live at 3617 Alabama Road.

While I have been at times employed by the City of Jonesboro in temporary roles, I am an independent journalist who takes special projects for the mayor. I speak only for myself. The issue of designating a street in honor of Dr. King was several years old when I retired as editor of The Sun in 2012; it's seven years older now. I would like to see it resolved in my lifetime., as would you, too.

After the council formed a United Coalition to “stud[y] all possibilities of the designation of Memorial Highways or a suitable and acceptable alternative naming opportunity,” I volunteered to assist Dr. Coleman, who was appointed chairman, with whatever needed to be done to carry out the committee’s assignment. As such, I attended all meetings, kept minutes and provided some research.

When the coalition voted to recommend three proposals to the council, I prepared the proposed ordinances, with the help of the city attorney and chief of staff. I used the ordinance renaming Young Road as a guide.

One of the proposals has been, to date, non-controversial — naming a trail after Dr. King and establishing an educational component on the portion of the trail that will run from ASU to downtown. That’s a wonderful idea, and hopefully that ordinance will be adopted tonight. Unfortunately, because the proposed sales tax didn’t pass, there is only enough money available now to build a part of that trail. Completing it may take years.

It was clear from the coalition’s meetings that nine of the 11 members, while supporting the trail idea, wanted to recommend a street naming proposal, which was mission stated in your resolution. They offered two.

One would rename all of Aggie Road, and the Public Works Committee rejected that proposal. I agreed with that action. The name “Aggie Road” has a clear historical meaning, even more so than Johnson Avenue.

However, the committee voted to amend the Commerce Drive ordinance to what is now version 2, and I doubt that many people here could really explain what it would do. That ordinance now reminds me of the children’s game “Twister.” To get there, you have to put one hand on a portion of the road that would be a “memorial highway,” another on a portion outside the city that you would ask the county to rename, a foot on a portion that now has no name and the other foot on a portion that will be built by the Highway Department. The ordinance as amended says that’s the best we can do.

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At the last meeting Mr. McClain proposed, in effect, to amend this ordinance back to version 1, which would simply rename Commerce Drive as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Drive and to seek extending that name to other portions of the road as soon as possible. The end result will connect Interstate 555 with U.S. Highway 49. While that project will not be complete for two or three years, it is funded and it will become a major arterial worthy of Dr. King's name.

The research shows that the City Council has on many occasions voted to rename a street — twice for ASU and other times for a new industry — most of the latter without opposition. The requests from ASU involved the same major arterial, what is now Red Wolf Boulevard. So there are plenty of precedents.

When you voted unanimously in June to form a committee to “study all possibilities,” no one said, “No matter what the committee comes up with, I will vote against it.” No one offered an amendment to ask the Highway Department for a memorial highway designation on Johnson, which would have resulted in no addresses being changed.

When you voted unanimously to appoint the members of the Unity Coalition, no one said, “This is a waste of their time because I would never vote to rename a street for Dr. King.”

This Unity Coalition of good citizens, with Dr. Coleman as chairman keeping it focused on what you asked, made a good-faith effort to carry out the mission you set and presented an “acceptable alternative naming opportunity” as to Commerce Drive. Please support Mr. McClain's motion and then adopt the ordinance as recommended by the coalition. Do it because it's the right thing to do.

Thank you.