

Midland residents debate naming street after Martin Luther King Jr.

MIDLAND (AP) — Martin Luther King Jr.'s name has been the subject of a debate in President-elect George W. Bush's hometown. The debate began two years ago, when a city councilman introduced a motion to rename a street after the slain civil rights leader.

Ever since, the issue has simmered and cooled — mostly along racial lines.

"It got real hot toward the latter part of the summer of 1999," city councilman Mike Canon said Monday. "And it continues to come up. I don't think it's resolved in some folks' minds, and short of naming a street after Dr. King, I don't know that it will be settled."

In the past, officials have proposed renaming Fairgrounds Road, which lies on the eastern edge of Midland, after King.

City councilman James Bradford said he will propose naming a road scheduled to be built around a planned sports complex after King.

"What has been the problem is there has not been the support in the council or in the majority of the community to rename an existing street. So to me, let's go for something that doesn't have a name," he said.

Bradford, who is black and the only minority on the city council, has assembled a 12-member committee

of residents from various racial backgrounds to study his proposal. The committee's first meeting is slated for next Monday.

Bradford said he will present his proposal before the city council in April. In 1999, Bradford's predecessor, Julius Brooks, failed to get Fairgrounds Road renamed after King.

"I don't care if it's renaming it for Dr. Martin Luther King or George W. Bush or George Washington. I don't think it serves any particular purpose."

— Mike Canon
city councilman

During an Aug. 24, 1999, council meeting, Brooks filed a motion to have the street renamed. The motion was shot down when council members refused to second it. Mayor Bobby Burns said at the time he would have seconded Brooks' motion, but could not because of a legal restriction.

The council's position was that Midland needed to "preserve the historical significance" of Fairgrounds Road.

Longtime residents remain divided on the issue.

Many of Midland's older, white residents said renaming Fairgrounds Road would violate its historic past.

"They used to have the county fair and the rodeo off Fairgrounds Road," said longtime resident Joan Baskin. "Some of the really old folks who lived here said, 'Wait a minute, let's not start changing historic roads' names.' When you get into discussions like that, you find that people polarize."

Meanwhile, Alma Marshall, who is black and has lived in Midland for 43 years, said Bradford's proposed alternative amounts to pandering.

"The black community is not monolithic, so we don't always have the same feeling about everything, but my feeling about it is if they want to name just a little side street around a sports complex after Dr. King, they can keep it. That is an insult."

Canon said he did not like the "business of renaming roads" and said there were better uses of government funds.

"I don't care if it's renaming it for Dr. Martin Luther King or George W. Bush or George Washington," he

said. "I don't think it serves any particular purpose. I'd rather see whatever money it costs to rename a road — and it does cost money — go into programs to help the impoverished."

Marshall called the lack of a road named in King's memory an "insult."

"I think this speaks pretty poorly of Midland and is an insult to Dr. King and Dr. King's memory not to honor him with anything other than a little, rinky dink park," he said.

Other officials have suggested other streets, including Front Street, which runs east to west through Midland, a city of about 100,000. "One of the reasons I like Front Street is it is a business street," said Robbyne Hocker Fuller, who ran against Bradford for his council seat.

Renaming any street after King could prove to be volatile, given Midland's recent history, including disputes over the waving of the rebel flag at high school football games and school integration, said Marshall.

"It is somewhat of a controversial issue, and I certainly can't speak for those who are in favor of honoring Dr. King," Canon said. "I respect him as a great American and someone who did something very important for our country, but there are a lot of other people who did important things for America too."

Man may lose eye for freeing blue heron

FORT WORTH (AP) — An effort to free a stuck blue heron may cost a man one of his eyes.

A heron that appeared to be dead jabbed Christopher Leeper, while he was out on the water, in the eye after he tried to free the bird, which was snagged in a trotline, hooks buried in its wing and breast.

As Leeper freed the bird, it struck him with its long, sharp bill.

Now Leeper, is in danger of losing his left eye, finds himself temporarily unable to work and faces a growing stack of medical bills.

His friends jokingly tell him to hunt down the bird and kill it. Leeper, though, speaks fondly of his attacker.

"It wasn't his fault," he said. "I would do it again."

The weather had been cold and icy for several

days, but Jan. 6 was nice. Leeper, 26, and a friend, Dustin Ward, 24, loaded a canoe and headed to Lake Arlington.

Recent rains and snow had raised the lake level, and only a few branches were above the water at their favorite fishing spot near an island. Tangled in branches was a migratory blue heron.

The heron tried to flap its wings when Leeper reached out for it. Leeper cradled it with one hand and began removing the hooks with the other.

He said he kept the bird at arm's length, watching of its long, sharp bill.

"I tried to keep him as far away as I could," Leeper said in Monday's editions of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. "He thought I was trying to hurt him, turned around and gave me a funny look."

Later, Leeper realized the bird was pausing to

take aim, as if it were spearing a fish.

Despite his injury, Leeper removed the hooks and untangled the bird. The heron moved only about 10 feet away after Leeper set him free.

"After that, he knew what I was trying to do," Leeper said. "He looked like he felt sorry. He watched me as I grabbed my eye. I think he felt regretful, if a bird can feel regretful."

Despite two surgeries, and another one scheduled, he said his left eye is not expected to regain sight.

A year ago, Leeper started a general contracting business and has yet to get medical insurance. His medical bills are approaching \$20,000.

"I don't know where I'm going to find the money," he said. "I'm barely making my house payment right now. But I'm an optimist, and everything will work out, I think."

Corrections employees request higher wages

AUSTIN (AP) — Prison guards and other corrections employees are taking their requests for better pay and benefits to the state Capitol.

Members of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees were scheduled to have a candlelight vigil late Monday, a day before they planned to take their requests to lawmakers.

"This campaign will continue to push for professional wages, improved working conditions and benefits," a flyer announcing the 7 p.m. vigil said. "We will continue this fight until results are made for the future of corrections employees."

Several top lawmakers have said they are in favor of pay raises and increased funding to pay for additional staff at the state's prisons.

But while the 2002-2003 proposed state budget includes \$42 million for prison guard pay raises promised last summer, it does not include any new money for additional raises or staff.

And finding funding for additional raises will be tough. Only \$300 million is estimated to be left from the \$108.2 billion budget for all new spending.

Union executive director Brian Olsen said the guards had no specific dollar requests, but want the state "to pay them something decent to keep them. I mean, it's a public safety issue. They're going to have to dig deep to take care of this or the public isn't going to be safe."

Starting pay for a prison guard is about \$18,000 in Texas, the 43rd lowest level in the country, according to the union.

A "reclassification" last year by then-Gov. George W. Bush boosted veteran officers' pay to slightly more than \$28,000, compared with the national average of about \$34,000.

Currently, there are 23,622 guards working in the Texas prison system, the nation's largest. A total of 2,595 positions are open.

News in Brief

Police respond to Pizza Hut shooting

HOUSTON (AP) — Police were responding Monday afternoon to a reported shooting outside a Pizza Hut restaurant in eastern Harris County, authorities said.

One person was reported wounded in a vehicle in the parking lot, according to William Devazier of the Channelview Fire Department, and at least one suspect was thought to be in the restaurant Monday afternoon.

No hostages were thought to be inside the eatery, Devazier said.

Rescuers were unable to get to the victim immediately because of a dog inside the vehicle, Devazier said. Animal control workers were en route shortly after 4 p.m.

Fire officials also were concerned about who might be inside the Pizza Hut.

"We do not want to take any chances of any of our guys being in danger by getting up near the building," Devazier said.

Federal aid offered to storm victims

Residents of three Northeast Texas counties whose homes and property sustained damage from severe ice storms that hit last month need only pick up the phone to get the process of financial assistance under way, state and federal officials said late Sunday.

Individuals in Cass, Red River and Bowie counties can apply for low-interest loans and grants to repair homes, replace personal property and offset losses to agriculture and small businesses. There is also relief available in the way of disaster unemployment benefits and housing.

About 1,000 calls have come in to a toll-free number set up to take information. A Disaster Field Office was set up in Texarkana, but that is only for management of the relief efforts, said Don Rogers, spokesman for the Texas Department of Public Safety's Division of Emergency Management.

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