

If Rosa Parks Way naming is an example, time may heal wounds on new Chavez Boulevard

By [Margaret Haberman, The Oregonian](#)

July 17, 2009, 10:05PM



Olivia Bucks/The Oregonian Traffic buzzes past the intersection of Rosa Parks Way and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. While anger is fresh over a recent street renaming -- 39th Avenue to Cesar E. Chavez Boulevard -- much of the neighborhood opposition to the Rosa Parks renaming appears to have run its course. They say time heals all wounds. On Rosa Parks Way, three years seem to have almost done the trick.

Many on the renamed North Portland thoroughfare say their revamped addresses have caused few disruptions since the 2006 decision. Their experience may be a harbinger for neighbors involved in the city's latest street fight over freshly minted Cesar E. Chavez Boulevard.

Rosa Parks Way used to be Portland Boulevard before the City Council changed the name to honor the memory of the civil rights activist who had died less than a year earlier.

The quick transition -- the council waived a city law requiring an extensive vetting process -- angered some residents. Community organizers from the Piedmont neighborhood opposed the change and complained that the city did a shoddy job of notifying residents of the plan.

The abrupt change felt like a plunge into a cold lake -- a shock to the system, but then you get used to it, said Chris Brentano, who lives on Rosa Parks Way in the rapidly gentrifying Woodlawn neighborhood.

"It's been a couple years now and we're just totally used to it," Brentano said. "And I like the name, too."

Rosa Parks Way runs west to east from North Willamette Boulevard to Northeast 41st Avenue. Along the way, it's interrupted by the Dekum Triangle and the Concordia University campus.

Most intersections along the road are still adorned with two street signs to prevent confusion during the changeover. Those reading Portland Boulevard are scheduled to be removed this year.

Despite persistent grumbling, the name change has had little impact on the neighborhood, said Bill Van Nostran, pastor of Northminster Presbyterian Church on the corner of Rosa Parks and North Atlantic Avenue.

"Except for some longtime residents who were not enamored of the change -- or change in general -- I can't really say there's been an appreciable or noticeable difference," he said.

Van Nostran has printed new business cards since the name change went into effect, but the update was prompted by other contact information changes besides the street name. "We've certainly changed our e-mail address a lot more often than our street address," he said.

Van Nostran was moved that the city would change a street bearing its own name to honor the memory of Rosa Parks and said he appreciates the symbolism of choosing a thoroughway that intersects with Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, a street renamed in 1989 for another civil rights-era hero.

While MLK has become an accepted name on the Portland street grid, Rosa Parks Way also crosses 39th Avenue, where residents are fuming over the switch to Chavez, approved last month.

The objections have been similar with each street renaming: paperwork changes, business rebrandings and the erasure of Portland history.

But a few things set the Chavez renaming apart from Rosa Parks Way. One is scope: Rosa Parks stretches roughly four miles; 39th Avenue runs for 7.2 miles. The city spent \$13,000 installing the Rosa Parks signs and will spend an additional \$7,000 taking down the Portland Boulevard signs. The city has allocated \$150,000 for the Chavez renaming, including \$35,000 for consulting fees and a projected \$86,000 for signs.

Another major difference is procedural: The City Council originated the Rosa Parks renaming, prompted by the Albina Ministerial Alliance, and bypassed the city's 1989 renaming ordinance.

The Chavez campaign began in similar fashion, but then the city changed course: Former Mayor Tom Potter championed the 2007 cause of Latino advocates who wanted to rename North Interstate Avenue for Chavez, but the idea crumbled in the

face of sustained neighborhood opposition. The council then decided to do something it hadn't done before: follow the city's street ordinance, leading to the renaming of 39th Avenue.

The ordinance requires that citizens initiate any street renaming intended to celebrate a person and mandates lengthy signature-gathering and notification protocol. It also requires a five-year period between the honoree's death and the name change, a rule that the Rosa Parks process ignored.

William Schneider, a chiropractor with an office on Southeast 39th Avenue who led the effort to save the street name, said no decisions have been made about whether to challenge the Chavez change in court or to seek voter approval of a charter amendment that could reverse the decision.

History shows that such efforts typically fail. Tracy Weber spearheaded an unsuccessful petition to change Rosa Parks Way back to Portland Boulevard.

Weber said she still opposes the Rosa Parks name change, mostly for historical reasons. A fifth-generation Oregonian who moved to Portland Boulevard in 2002, she jokes that she owns a "105-year-old house on a 3-year-old street."

She supports the city's mission to honor Parks, but said the Rosa Parks process didn't afford residents the same opportunity for input as the Chavez renaming. "A lot of people have accepted the new name because they didn't think they had any recourse," she said.

When the Portland Boulevard signs come down, Weber said she hopes to snag one. "It's a piece of history," she said.

Boulevard Tacos is also trying to preserve the past.

Mario Segovia recently became the owner of the restaurant on Rosa Parks Way off North Denver Avenue. Segovia was an employee when the previous owner chose the name.

Like the street on which the restaurant now sits, its name is something of a memorial.

"We tried to keep something from before," he said.

-- Jake Cohen: jakecohen@news.oregonian.com