Panel favors renaming I-110, not Acadian, in King’s honor

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The Planning Commission on Monday recommended that the city-parish should not rename Acadian Thruway after slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but it should support an alternative — naming Interstate 110 in King’s honor.

Planning Commissioner Graydon Walker made the motion to name I-110 after King following a commission public hearing that lasted just over an hour, and the commissioners present voted unanimously in favor. Commissioner Al Trickett, the school board’s representative, was absent at the time of the vote.

Walker, the mayor’s top aide, said the motion he made reflects the mayor’s opinion as well as his own. The commission’s recommendation now goes to the Metro Council, which is scheduled to deal with the issue on April 17.

While supporting Walker’s motion, Commissioner Donna Mayeux said she hoped the council would consider other alternatives, like perhaps naming the Interstate 10 Mississippi River Bridge after King.

Councilwoman Sharon Weston, who had spoken in support of the Acadian name change, said she was not opposed to exploring alternatives but that she doesn’t consider the Acadian issue to be over. Weston said she would like to find out what the original proponents want.

The proponents of the Acadian name change appear somewhat divided.

Jerome King, president of People for a Change, the organization that applied for the Acadian street name change, said he would continue to push for the original objective. Changing the name of an interstate highway would not accomplish their purpose, he said.

“I don’t care if you do have the sign up there,” he said. “Skywatch is not going to say you have an accident at Martin Luther King Jr.

An overflow crowd attended Monday’s Planning Commission meeting that focused on a proposal to rename Acadian Thruway after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
and Hollywood. They’re still going to say 110."

The Rev. H.B. Williams, head of the local Martin Luther King Foundation and a supporter of People for a Change and its request, said the interstate designation would be a “good compromise,” but was surprised at the opposition the original request had encountered.

“This city is a racist city,” he said.

Several opponents of the name change said that Acadian was given its current name to commemorate the ancestors of another ethnic group that has made a major contribution to the state.

One speaker, Heidi Beall, said the street’s full name, Acadian Bicentennial Thruway, commemorated the 200th anniversary of the Acadian exile and that changing the street name would mean “stealing someone’s heritage to benefit someone else’s desires.”

The council chamber was packed for the hearing, and the crowd, totaling about 300 people, spilled out into the hallway. At least one plainclothes police officer along with three uniformed officers were on hand just in case things got out of hand, but they didn’t.

Commission Chairman Duke Welch managed to quell occasional rumblings and murmurings from the crowd and occasional out-of-order remarks by speakers.

Representatives of both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Association for the Advancement of White People were on hand. Both opposed the street name change but for different reasons.

State Rep. Joe Delpit, a proponent, said concerns about the expense of changing letterheads and signs were not real issues because mail would still be delivered even if addressed to Acadian and signs would have to be replaced eventually because of wear and tear. The names of other streets had been changed without anywhere near as much controversy, he said.

“Some people don’t want to see the name changed to that of a great black man,” Delpit said.

“He wasn’t a great black man as such, he was a great American,” said supporter Julius Stewart. “He gave his life for everybody, for America itself. I often wonder why we pray first and hate second.”

Babs Wilson, identifying herself as representing the Taxpayer Education Association, said nothing should be named after Martin Luther King.

“We remember that it was Martin Luther King out leading the troops who were against our troops in Vietnam,” she said, claiming that King had Communist ties, wanted a Communist victory and that to name a street after King would be “tantamount to naming one Benedict Arnold Boulevard.”

Wilson insisted that King’s reputation was the product of propaganda disseminated by a biased news media.

“They’ve made a media myth out of this man,” she said.

“What the media’s done and what they haven’t done is not the issue here,” Welch told her, and Commissioner Barry Solar reminded all concerned that the issue on the agenda was simply whether Acadian Thruway should be renamed Martin Luther King Thruway.

Duncan Walker, who distributed National Association for the Advancement of White People literature but did not speak, said prior to the meeting that no government agency should consider honoring King until the federal government releases certain documents now under seal and the whole story of his life can be examined.

But most of the opponents of the street name change did not express opposition to naming something else in his honor.

Marilyn O’Brien, who said she had played piano in King’s father’s church, praised King as “the Moses of his people” and proposed naming the interstate or building something entirely new, like a riverwalk, and naming that after King. Her opposition to renaming Acadian was based on nothing more than her desire to keep from losing another piece of the Baton Rouge in which she grew up, she said.

Other speakers referred to the confusion that people who visit Baton Rouge periodically could experience if Acadian’s name is changed.

George Eames, president of the Baton Rouge NAACP, said Acadian was not good enough to be named after King. Eames brought a slide show to display the rundown streetscape and said it would be an insult to King to put his name on the street.

Nathaniel Perkins said if government wants to do something for Acadian, it should run off the drug dealers and prostitutes, alleviate flooding and generally improve conditions along the street.