

THE NATION; An attempt to honor Chavez hits a roadblock; It proves difficult to rename a street for the activist. Hostile council meetings in Portland, Ore., end in an impasse. Los Angeles Times December 9, 2007 Sunday

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Los Angeles Times

December 9, 2007 Sunday
Home Edition

SECTION: MAIN NEWS; National Desk; Part A; Pg. 20

LENGTH: 997 words

HEADLINE: THE NATION;

An attempt to honor Chavez hits a roadblock;

It proves difficult to rename a street for the activist. Hostile council meetings in Portland, Ore., end in an impasse.

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DATELINE: PORTLAND, ORE.

BODY:

Fourth Avenue ambles for 30 blocks past high-rise office towers, regional banks, upscale retailers and such urban landmarks as the county courthouse and City Hall.

Fourth also rolls through one of Portland's most prominent symbols of diversity: Chinatown. An ornamental red and gold gateway inscribed with dragons and Chinese characters greets visitors and evokes ties to the Pacific Rim. Red and gold street lamps, a gift from Taiwan, line the street near restaurants that specialize in dim sum.

This is not the street that Latino activist Marta Guembes wanted to rename in honor of Cesar E. Chavez, the labor organizer and champion of migrant farm workers.

Guembes had set her sights on Interstate Avenue, a road in north Portland lined with small businesses, and nearer to the city's growing Latino community. But when some neighborhood associations objected, City Council members selected Fourth.

The alternative soon proved unpopular. After a series of acrimonious, racially charged public hearings, the council reversed course and declared an impasse.

Renaming city streets in Oregon's largest city usually isn't an epic struggle. The city recently renamed Portland Boulevard as Rosa Parks Way.

Chavez Boulevard, however, struck a nerve.

Unlucky timing hurt the cause, said Jack Corbett, associate professor of public administration at Portland State University, with the public spotlight on the growing Latino population.

"Part of the reaction here parallels reaction of parts of the American public to the marches last year of immigrants demanding better treatment. Sort of a 'how dare they,' " Corbett said.

Chavez Boulevard activists "demanded Interstate," Corbett said, and "that is just not Portland style. It's a violation of Portland's notion of civic civility to have a group make such a demand."

Guembes insists her group played by the city's rules. She blames racism and hatred for the street name debacle, citing the hostile reception her group received in public meetings.

"While we presented," she said of one meeting, "people screamed at us. They laughed at us. They insulted us. They did not listen. They made racist comments, like 'Go back where you came from.' There's no way I can ever be the same after being so insulted."

All agree that the meetings lacked decorum.

Mayor Tom Potter, the only member of the all-white council who supported renaming Interstate, walked out of one council meeting. At another, City Commissioner Sam Adams chided Portlanders for allowing the "community conversation" to devolve into a "screaming match" punctuated with "racist epithets."

It started quietly several months ago when the Chavez Boulevard committee gathered petitions, collected letters of support and established a website.

On Sept. 6, the council adopted a resolution calling for a six-week comment time on renaming Interstate. But tempers flared at two community meetings in October.

On Nov. 14, two councilmen suggested naming Fourth for Chavez. The next day, the council voted 4-1 to rename Fourth. A week later, it reversed that decision.

Potter called for a citywide "time of healing."

"For me personally, it's very difficult to talk about healing," Guembes said. Instead, she wants her organization to register voters and help elect Latino candidates.

Portland, a city of 537,000, typically rates high on livability index ratings. It is home to an extensive light-rail system, a world-class bookstore, museums and microbrew pubs.

Nearly 80% of Portland residents are white, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Latinos, the largest minority group in Oregon, form 9% of the population. Asians are 7% and African Americans are 6.6%.

Morteza Aleali, an Iranian-born acupuncturist who owns an herb shop in Chinatown, said the City Council acted without asking store owners their opinions. "It's an extra expense to change signs and advertising, and it creates confusion," he said.

Old Town Grocery sits at the corner of Burnside Street and Fourth Avenue, next to the Chinatown gateway. Neighbors include an adult bookstore and a homeless mission. Owners Eunice and David Chong were mystified by the city's push to rename Fourth. "There's no Spanish people here," David said.

The name-change drama also befuddles those closer to the city center. "Why change the name now?" asked Portland resident Jose Garcia, on a break from a Tito's Burritos stand at Third Avenue and SW Washington Street. "Fourth Avenue has a name with a history. They should name a new street for Cesar Chavez."

"I'm fine with it either way," said Portland Community College student Phil Pattone, hopping off his bike at Fourth Avenue's Pioneer Place, an indoor shopping mall.

"Fourth, or Cesar Chavez would be cool too."

Other cities have changed street signs to honor the labor leader without this much discord. Grand Rapids, Mich., settled upon a Cesar E. Chavez Boulevard, and Ogden, Utah, established a Cesar E. Chavez Street.

Los Angeles and San Francisco have christened streets after Chavez. Chicago named a bridge after him.

The Los Angeles-based Cesar Chavez Foundation is supporting efforts to create a national holiday honoring Chavez and sees all commemorative projects, such as the renaming of streets, as powerful educational tools, said Paul Park, its interim president.

Meanwhile, Guembes hopes to teach Portland that Latinos are an integral part of the city.

"Cesar Chavez is an American hero," she said. "He led the movement for justice, better jobs, wages and education for farm workers. He led the movement to reduce pesticides so we have healthier foods for our tables. He is a true hero."

Guembes works as a Multnomah County case manager assisting high-risk, low-income pregnant women.

Her mother was a farm laborer. She gets emotional talking about the labor organizer and civil rights activist who co-founded the United Farm Workers union, and who died in 1993.

"This is only the beginning for this community to come together," she said.

"We can still honor Cesar Chavez. That I can guarantee you."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: CULTURE CLASH? The gate to Portland's Chinatown stands on Fourth Avenue, which the City Council proposed to rename after labor organizer Cesar E. Chavez. Store owners said they weren't consulted. The idea was rejected after racially charged public hearings. PHOTOGRAPHER: Ross William Hamilton Oregonian
PHOTO: ACRIMONY: Marta Guembes, left, and County Commissioner Maria Rojo de Steffey listen during a council meeting. PHOTOGRAPHER: Ross William Hamilton Oregonian
PHOTO: (BULLDOG EDITION) TRANSITION: The Nite Hawk sits on the corner of Rosa Parks Way -- formerly Portland Boulevard -- and Interstate Avenue. Attempts to rename Interstate for Cesar Chavez have failed. PHOTOGRAPHER: Michael Lloyd The Oregonian

LOAD-DATE: December 9, 2007 