

Former Mayor Albert Wheeler called the council action 'a tribute to my family and about 25-30 old hard-core NAACP members.'

Council renames park to honor Wheeler

By BONNIE DeSIMONE
CITY GOVERNMENT REPORTER

Rats once roamed where the play equipment in Summit Park stands now, and the slaughterhouse stench sickened residents of the largely black neighborhood 20 years ago.

Tuesday night, those past residents and others successfully prevailed on Ann Arbor City Council to rename the park carved out of a ghetto to honor Ann Arbor's only black mayor, Democrat Albert Wheeler.

"Obviously, I'm very gratified and appreciate the tribute," Wheeler said this morning. He

watched Tuesday's council meeting on television.

Wheeler called the council action "a tribute to my family and about 25-30 old hard-core NAACP members who worked from 1950 and even now are still working."

"It was a very warm feeling that people had respect for what you were trying to do," he said.

The controversy which sometimes punctuated Wheeler's public life spilled over into the council debate, as some neighborhood residents objected to the name change. Three council Republicans voted against the renaming.

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PARK

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Fourth Ward Republican Gerald Jernigan startled the audience and his GOP colleagues by joining the Democrats in supporting the name change.

Jernigan, who is running for mayor against incumbent Democrat Edward Pierce, said his vote was not cast to curry favor. "I heard some compelling testimony tonight," he said. "The people who are for this wouldn't vote for me anyway."

Jernigan publicly apologized to the three other council Republicans. "I changed my mind from last night, and I don't usually do that," he said.

Those who spoke on behalf of naming the park after Wheeler included representatives of area churches and the Ann Arbor Community Center. But the most emotional arguments came from people who spent their childhoods in the Summit Park area.

The neighborhood is no longer predominantly black, a process which started with the closing of Jones School (now Community High School) in the mid-1960s.

Blondeen Munson recalled the Ann Arbor of her youth — a town where newspaper ads for homes and jobs still specified whether applicants should be white or "colored."

"In order to get to where we are, someone had to make a sacrifice," she said. "Al Wheeler made that sacrifice — probably in terms of career development. If you needed

help, you called the Wheelers. They wrote the book on advocacy in this town."

Letty Wickliffe, one of Ann Arbor's few prominent black Republicans and a past political adversary of Wheeler's, contended that the name change was inappropriate because so many people helped create the park.

Wickliffe, longtime president of the North Central Property Owners' Association, said another spot, like Liberty Plaza, could have been chosen to bear Wheeler's name. She accused advocates of the name change of bringing it up in conjunction with the Martin Luther King birthday celebration to "emotionalize the decision."

"It's plantation politics — only naming places associated with blacks after blacks," she said.

Eleanor Pollack, another NCPOA member, distributed petitions signed by 450 people opposed to the name change. She said council should have abided by a draft policy developed by the Parks Advisory Commission last year which recommended that parks be named after adjacent streets or subdivisions.

Those comments drew an angry response from Larry Hunter, council's only black member and the sponsor of the resolution to rename Summit Park. He said ignoring the history of the neighborhood would be "tantamount to dancing on someone's grave."

Hunter, a First Ward Democrat, said he thought Wheeler's contributions should be recognized while he is still alive. "I'm genuinely sorry the neighborhood association would take this as someone trying to shove something down their

throats," Hunter said.

At one point during the debate, Seth Hirshorn, D-Second Ward, said race relations are an "unresolved conflict" in this country. He implied that that conflict might be behind some objections to the park renaming.

Republicans reacted angrily to Hirshorn's comments. Jeannette Middleton, R-Third Ward, denied that racism had any bearing on GOP opposition to the name change, and said she was "bitter" that Hirshorn had raised that issue.

Dick Deem, R-Second Ward, said he has black friends who would not speak to him again if he supported changing the name of the park.

Wheeler said this morning that opposition to the renaming of the park "was political and not necessarily racial."

Mayor Edward Pierce took time out to summarize some of Wheeler's accomplishments outside his tenure as mayor (1975-78): University of Michigan professor of microbiology and immunology, instrumental in creating the city's Human Relations Commission and writing the state Fair Housing Act, and a "superb softball player."

Wheeler, said Pierce, was "a burr under the saddle, spurring us on" to principles of integration and equality.

Wheeler and his wife, Emma, founded the Model Cities Health Clinic, and were later embroiled in lengthy litigation with the city over whether the clinic should have turned over financial records to the city for an audit.

News Staff Reporter Tom Rogers contributed to this story.



NEWS PHOTO • ROBERT CHASE

PRAYER IN THE PARK — Representatives of several Ann Arbor churches gather Wednesday at Summit Park — which is being renamed Wheeler Park — for a prayer vigil to celebrate the name change, honoring former Mayor Albert Wheeler.

NEW DAY

Park renaming vindicates ex-mayor's struggle

By WILLIAM B. TREML
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

An old civil rights warrior, home from the battlefield of years past, sat at his living room table Wednesday and talked about his battles.

Al Wheeler is graying now and the years of struggle have left their mark. But at 72, he remains articulate, courtly, polite.

And the fire, deep within him, which three decades ago ignited a cause and helped awaken a city, still smolders.

The night before, a divided Ann Arbor City Council voted to change the name of Summit Park to Wheeler Park, in honor of Ann Ar-

bor's only black mayor. Ed Pierce, who now occupies the mayor's office, noted that Wheeler played a pivotal role in establishing the city's Human Relations Commission and writing Ann Arbor's Fair Housing Act.

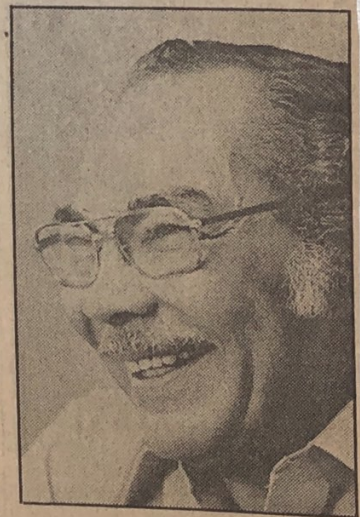
And over the noon hour Wednesday, a small group of local ministers braved 17-degree temperatures to hold a prayer vigil at the park in celebration of the renaming.

Wheeler remembers the beginnings. He goes back a long way. Back to the days when black students at the University of Michigan were not allowed to live in campus dormitories. Back to when Ann Arbor apartment house managers

quickly put up "No Vacancy" signs when a black appeared at the rental office. Back to when the total number of blacks working at U-M was a half-dozen, all in menial jobs.

Al and Emma Wheeler met while they were students at U-M in the late 1930s. After receiving their degrees, they married and decided to settle in Ann Arbor, despite the racial bias they met here.

"We had our share of discrimination here. Plenty of it," said Wheeler, who served as Ann Arbor mayor from 1975-78. "But Emma and I decided if we were going to live here, if we were going to raise our



ALBERT WHEELER
... remembers a city divided by race

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