

Long Beach Press Telegram

Effort on to honor MLK holiday

Some residents want City Hall closed for day; council cites cost.

By Jenny Marder

Staff writer

Wednesday, December 08, 2004 - CERRITOS — Cerritos resident Charlie Ara remembers Aug. 28, 1963 like it was yesterday. People fainting in the street from the sweltering heat. Major League Baseball legend Jackie Robinson singing "We Shall Overcome." Protestants, Catholics and Jews marching together down Constitution Avenue, united around a common cause.

But mostly Ara, a former Roman Catholic priest, remembers standing 100 feet from Martin Luther King Jr. as he gave his legendary "I Have a Dream" speech.

"He didn't seem to have any notes, but he just electrified the audience," Ara recalls.

Ara is one of the leaders of a growing movement to make Martin Luther King Jr. Day an official holiday in Cerritos.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day was celebrated as a federal holiday for the first time on Jan. 20, 1986.

Now, many governments, banks and schools close on the third Monday of January to honor the legacy of the man who fought to bring racial equality to America, shaping the course of modern history. Downey, Lakewood, Long Beach, Norwalk and Paramount, Los Angeles, Signal Hill and South Gate are among the area cities that close their doors and give employees the day off.

But Cerritos City Hall remains open.

A group of residents lobbied officials at a Nov. 22 City Council meeting to observe MLK Day by making it a fixed holiday. More are expected to return at a 7 p.m. council meeting today.

Ara sees a disconnect that a city known for its ethnic diversity isn't doing everything it can to honor the late civil rights leader.

"A lot of people are steamed up that the city of Cerritos, which is so diverse, can't have a holiday honoring Martin Luther King," Ara said. "Where are the role models, where are the heroes? Martin Luther King stands with Mahatma Gandhi. I think the whole nonviolent movement is based upon people's belief in the dignity and the value of every human being. Why do we remember any holiday? They give meaning to life."

A motion by Councilman John Crawley at the last council meeting to add MLK Day as a fixed holiday failed to get the required second motion from another council member.

Councilman Paul Bowlen said that adding another holiday would be fiscally irresponsible for the city, which already has 12, nine of which are fixed, and three that employees can take at any time with a supervisor's approval.

"We already have 12 holidays, more than any other city in the county, except one...", he said. "We have to be fiscally responsible in my mind."

Crawley countered that with other governments, banks and post offices closed, the city can't get much done that day anyway.

"It's not going to cost much," Crawley said. "The only additional cost would be for emergency people who are working. We might lose money on emergency services and broken water lines, a few hundred dollars at the most."

A handful of other area cities, including Bellflower and Cypress, keep City Hall open on MLK Day.

Councilwoman Laura Lee suggested turning one of the city's floating holidays those that employees take when they want into a fixed holiday instead.

Assistant City Manager John Saunders said that the employee association had no interest in changing a floating holiday to a fixed day, which would give workers less flexibility to choose days off. All contract agreements require union approval.

Saunders also pointed out that one of the city's three floating holidays is already designated as a holiday for King. In other words, it's considered a holiday for King in name, but employees can take the day off any time and City Hall doesn't close.

"Negotiations are always a long and ticklish process and this was done about 20 years ago...", Saunders said. "People were asking for a floating holiday and a Martin Luther King holiday and we ended up doing it in that manner. We decided to celebrate the MLK holiday, but to celebrate it as a floater."

Cerritos resident Alex Beanum scoffed at the policy.

In 1984, designating a floating holiday in King's name was innovative, said Beanum, who served on Cerritos City Council from 1978 to 1986. Now, he said, it's outdated.

Beanum said he'll do whatever it takes to close City Hall on that day. He plans to return at the next City Council meeting.

"We will return to public comments," he said. "There might be demonstrations. This is not going to go away quietly. You've got red states and blue states, but this is the commonality between them."