

Community Engagement Report on Renaming Taney Street

Rename Taney Coalition

Member Organizations: Fidler Square Neighborhood Association (FSNA), Young Chances Foundation, Center City Residents Association (CCRA), Residents Organized for Advocacy and Direction (ROAD), South of South Neighborhood Association (SOSNA)

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Report Summary

- In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Spring 2020, Taney Street residents publicly questioned the appropriateness of the street's name as it honors an individual whose actions conflict with the city of Philadelphia's values of being a diverse and inclusive city. Roger B. Taney was a slave owner with no connection to Philadelphia who, as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, wrote the *Dred Scott Decision* that stripped Black Americans of their rights and precipitated the Civil War. The racist decision was written in 1857; Minor Street was renamed Taney Street in 1858.
- The all-volunteer residents' group has worked with Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson's staff to develop a community engagement process around the possibility of renaming Taney Street. The process was endorsed by the registered community organizations in the neighborhoods where the street exists in the 2nd district. The first two elements of this process have been a Community Engagement Survey and a Virtual Town Hall.
- The vast majority (**96%**, among those living on or near Taney Street, **89%**) of Community Engagement Survey respondents approve of changing the name of Taney Street.
- For those survey respondents who did not support, they suggested that City Council should have other priorities, or felt that the logistics for changing addresses on sources of mail and official documents would be onerous. The USPS forwards mail for ten years when a street name is officially changed.
- Nearly all participants of the Virtual Town Hall thought it was disgraceful to have a street named in honor of Roger Taney. Many did not know the history of Justice Taney, his connection to the *Dred Scott Decision*, or the timing of the street's naming in his honor.
- Neighbors voiced concerns about the logistics of the renaming and recommended the creation of a step-by-step guide / fact sheet to help residents, especially elderly long-term residents, update any relevant addresses and documents if the name were to be changed.

- Ultimately the decision to officially rename Taney Street, which has stood for 163 years, is made by City Council: A bill that includes a new name must be passed by Council.
- As agreed upon with Councilmember Johnson’s staff, the next step of the process is to circulate this report and solicit opinions around new names. This report will be circulated through the relevant neighborhood organizations and citywide media. A survey is available here: <https://tinyurl.com/ykc7aykb> that asks the community who the finalists for a new name that represents the character and history of Philadelphia. There will be continued communication and transparency in this process and additional opportunity for public input.

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1) Background

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other victims of racial cruelty, violence, and murder, a volunteer group of Taney Street residents chose to question the appropriateness of the street’s name. After a series of outreach and events, the volunteer group has gained support for the reassessment of the name of Taney Street from neighborhood registered community organizations Fidler Square Neighbors Association (FSNA), South of South Neighbors Association (SOSNA), Residents Organized for Advocacy and Direction (ROAD), and Center City Residents Association (CCRA), and community groups like the Young Chances Foundation in Grays Ferry.

The volunteer group has worked with Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson’s staff to develop a community engagement process. The community consultation process has four goals: 1) to share information regarding the history of Taney Street's name, 2) to collect perspectives on current community values, 3) to obtain suggestions on street names, and 4) to discuss the potential logistics for street renaming.

This memo first provides historical context on Roger Taney and Taney Street. Next, this memo delivers an update on two elements of this community engagement process, a community survey and a virtual neighborhood town hall held in December 2020. The volunteer group will continue to work with community associations and group and elected leaders to develop recommendations for the renaming process. Any specific recommendations would be based on careful historical research and robust community engagement. Removing a naming designation is a serious step that cannot be taken lightly or hastily, and entails real costs for the street's residents, and should occur only under exceptional circumstances.

As a starting point, the group maintains that the names that Philadelphia attaches to streets, buildings, and public spaces make a symbolic statement about what a community values. These symbols send a message about what perspectives a neighborhood wishes to lift for emulation and pass on to successive generations.

Symbols matter. Some symbols, many times created in the distant past, do not reflect the community's current values. These may be morally repugnant to a community that values all residents and that rejects racism, discrimination, and bigotry. While there are many significant issues surrounding racial equality, removing symbols represents a powerful starting point for building bridges across disconnected communities and confronting deeper challenges. Upholding our values as citizens of modern Philadelphia should include openness to changing or otherwise contextualizing names that were attached to streets, buildings, or public spaces by prior stewards of the city whose values may, in contemporary circumstances, be objectionable.

2) **Historical Context**

Running the length of Philadelphia between 26th and 27th Streets non-consecutively from north to south Philadelphia, Taney Street is a part of seven different neighborhoods with extremely diverse demographics and is present in three City Council Districts (2nd, 4th, and 5th).

Roger B. Taney was the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court who wrote the "*Dred Scott Decision*." This decision ruled that Black Americans, regardless of whether free or enslaved, could never be citizens of the United States, and "have no rights that the white man is bound to respect." The 1857 decision stripped Black people of their rights and denied them basic human dignity. The decision reflected an extremist view of white supremacy and was widely opposed at the time. Many view the decision as an aggressive overreach of the powers of the Supreme Court and is considered a precipitating factor in the unbridgeable gap between Northern and Southern states on the slavery question that led to the Civil War. It is widely considered the worst decision the U.S. Supreme Court has ever made.

Just one year after the Dred Scott Decision, Minor Street in Fairmount was renamed Taney Street in 1858, during a time of upheaval in the city of Philadelphia, as open white supremacist Richard Vaux was elected mayor. Taney was a slave-owning Marylander with no known connection to Philadelphia. The timing of the name change represented a symbolic gesture supporting the court's ruling to strip African-Americans of any rights, citizenship, or standing in court (historical evidence from maps available at www.renametaney.com/history-of-taney-street). In the late 1890s, four additional nonconsecutive streets running north-south between 26th and 27th streets (Barnwell, Beacon, Ridgeway, and Verner) were renamed in Taney's honor as the street grid was systematized (see <https://www.phillyhistory.org/historicstreets/default.aspx>).

In recent years, a deeper reflection on Taney's tarnished legacy is leading to change. In 2017, statues of Taney were removed in both Baltimore and Annapolis as part of a broader effort to remove honorific symbols of supremacy and hate. In 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives removed Taney's bust from their chamber. Finally, in Philadelphia in 2020, the Taney Youth Baseball Association, 2014 Mid-Atlantic Little League Champions, wrote that they "cannot ignore the very real negative feelings that this name, 'Taney,' engenders among members of our community," announcing the result of their renaming process as the "Philadelphia Dragons."

3) **Ongoing Community Engagement Survey**

Process

Neighbors of Taney Street were invited to complete a community engagement survey posted publicly at www.renametaney.com in December. The survey was advertised through door hangers placed on every door knob on (or within one block intersecting) Taney Street. City Council District 2 homes and businesses received two door hangers, one week apart. The door hanger provided historic information about Roger Taney, directions for how to participate in the survey, and both digital and non-digital ways to participate; In addition to the web-based survey, a phone number was provided for neighbors to record voice messages. The survey was also sent to a mailing list of email addresses of those neighbors who voiced previous interest in the discussion. To date the survey has received responses from 165 neighbors, 51 of whom live on or near Taney Street.

Key Findings

- **The vast majority of respondents approve of changing the name: 96% of survey respondents approve of changing the name of Taney Street. Among those living on or near Taney Street, 89% approve of changing the name.**

- For those respondents who did not support, they suggested that City Council should have other priorities, or felt that the logistics for changing addresses on sources of mail and official documents would be onerous.

The community engagement survey remains open at www.renametaney.com.

Do you approve of changing the name of Taney Street?	All Survey Respondents	Respondents Living On/Near Taney Street
Yes	96%	89%
No	4%	11%

When asked what the name Taney Street means to neighbors, here are some representative responses from those who live on or near the street who did support:

- **Taney Street is my home, but I am embarrassed by its roots in hate and White Supremacy.**
- **I...find the name off-putting whenever I need to say it to someone.**
- **Now I know that the name honors a racist man and helps uphold anti-black structures in our city.**
- **My block is diverse and vibrant, and the exact opposite of what Justice Taney stood for. My neighbors deserve better.**
- **Taney should not be commemorated for his bigotry and inhumanity.**

A small number of neighbors did not support the name change. For those neighbors on or near the street who did not support, they suggested that City Council should have other priorities, or felt that the logistics for changing addresses on sources of mail and official documents would be onerous:

- **City Council should be more motivated in 2021 to addressing our Covid situation, unemployment, filthy streets,...vacant homes, homelessness, unemployment, violence on our streets etc....Efforts to change history could be better applied to matters that address our 2021 lives. Let's live in the present and not the past.**
- **I'm not for changing it, not for any lack of values, but because of the immensity of the process.**
- **Not a good use of time or much needed resources.**
- **Renaming is a waste of taxpayer money not to mention hardship for folks like me who live on the street...I think there are better things we can do to attack racism which I would totally support.**

Neighbors also provided many suggestions for new possible names, especially recognizing notable African-American Philadelphians, or other notable Americans (in alphabetical order):

- **Julian Abele**
- **Sadie Alexander**
- **Marion Anderson**
- **Octavius Catto**
- **John Coltrane**
- **Frederick Douglass**
- **W.E.B. DuBois**
- **James Forten**
- **Frank Kameny**
- **Caroline Lecount**
- **Billy Markward**
- **Thurgood Marshall**
- **Toni Morrison**
- **Paul Robeson**
- **Dred Scott**
- **William Still**
- **Harriet Tubman**

Or named after a principle that they want their community to uphold:

- **Friendship Street, Freedom Street, Humanity Street, Essential Resources Street, Liberation Street, Love Street, Lenape Street, Unity Street**

The community engagement survey remains open at www.renametaney.com (along with the new survey seeking finalists from this longer list of proposed names found here: <https://tinyurl.com/ykc7aykb>) and we welcome all Taney Street residents and neighbors to complete the survey to have their voices heard and their views added to those already shared above.

4) **Virtual Town Hall Discussion on Taney Street**

Process

On December 14th 2020, residents and neighbors of Taney Street gathered virtually for a community conversation around the name of the Street. The goal of the evening was to provide a safe and respectful space for the open and honest exploration of this topic and understand a range of perspectives. The event was advertised through door hangers placed on every door knob on (or within one block intersecting) Taney Street (City Council District 2 households received two

door hangers, one week apart) and through an email list of neighbors who voiced previous interest in the discussion.

The volunteer-organized event was the first opportunity to bring together an unprecedented conversation of residents from north to south Philadelphia to discuss the name Taney Street. More than 80 participants registered for the event, signaling significant interest and engagement in the issue. The town hall began with an introductory historical presentation on Roger Taney, and the history of Taney Street (see www.renametaney.com/history-of-taney-street).

The town hall then transitioned into a facilitated small group discussion. This report summarizes and anonymously paraphrases some of the representative comments and discussions to pull out common themes and ideas.

Key Findings

- **Participants engaged in lively discussion around a name that would reflect the values of the community.**
- **Nearly all participants thought it was disgraceful to have a street named in honor of Roger Taney**
- **Many did not know the history of Roger Taney or the timing of the street's naming in his honor.**
- **Neighbors were concerned about the logistics of the renaming and recommended the creation of a step-by-step guide for residents to update any relevant addresses and documents if the name were to be changed.**

First, and most importantly, nearly all participants thought it was “**disgraceful**” to have a street in our city named in honor of Roger Taney. For many involved, the connection between Roger Taney and Taney Street was new to them. Others were aware of the connection, or hoped that the connection wasn't true. When asked about the name Taney after the history discussion, here are some reactions:

- **It's uncomfortable to live on a street named after such a negative person.**
- **It's an abomination that we give Judge Taney this honor.**
- **I hadn't realized that the judge involved in the *Dred Scott decision* was this Taney. Once I learned that, it started to feel different. Especially because I'm from African descent. It affects me emotionally, and I'm shocked that here in Philadelphia we would have a street named after Taney.**
- **I don't know of any country in the world that builds statues to the people that betrayed the country we love.**
- **It's an insult to everybody in the city, a shameful and embarrassing vestige of slavery and native people that doesn't reflect our values.**

Asked about “what’s meaningful about a street name,” participants reflected on the multi-dimensional role that street names play. Street names serve an obvious practical purpose for delivering mail, receiving services, providing directions, and creating a neighborhood feeling.

Beyond the practical, street names are also “**more than a spot on the map**”, and are “**an intentional symbol**” that can “**honor or valorize people**” as a “**reflection on our democracy.**” They carry historical weight and both the good and bad that come with it.

A street name can “**bring good memories of happy home, first house, marriage, children,**” and it’s important to remember that people have created their own memories apart from the name. Some neighbors mentioned discussing the name with longtime residents, who may feel that changing the name would “represent a loss of control over their longtime homes.”

Discussing the legacy of Taney Street, many voiced support for a new name that would “**reflect the values of the community,**” “**honor the best of history and not the worst,**” and make the name something better for the next generation. Many were vocal about identifying a new name that reflected “**the opposite of Taney,**” and instead honored a Philadelphian who worked to promote equality and liberty.

Finally, an important area of discussion was around **the logistics of street name changes**. For the small number of participants who opposed the name change, the major concern was operational. A first concern was the forwarding of mail and changing mail addresses, and it was raised that USPS forwards mail for ten years when a street name is officially changed in the [USPS Address Management System](#). Beyond USPS, many raised concerns regarding changing licenses, legal documents, pensions and social security checks, deeds and wills.

Participants emphasized that the community would need substantial support and outreach to make sure that every resident, and especially older residents, of Taney Street had direct assistance with changing any records and important documents. Neighbors recommended developing a step-by-step guide with phone numbers and links (as has been done in other settings when street names were officially changed). The development of a guide to the process of address updating that can be drawn from Philadelphia’s previous experiences and those of other cities is essential for making the task of updating documents straightforward for all residents.

In all, the event brought together residents from Taney Street north to south in order to discuss the symbol importance of the street name, the legacy of Roger Taney, and the possible values that a new name could uphold.

5) Next Steps

- **Ultimately the decision to rename Taney Street, which has stood for 163 years, comes down to City Council: A bill that includes a new name must be passed by Council in order to officially change the name.**
- **The volunteer group, along with the neighborhood organizations, continues to work with Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson’s staff to establish precisely how the decision will be made.**
- **The next step is to develop a list of finalists for a new name. A survey is available at <https://tinyurl.com/ykc7aykb> for all community members to recommend names and vote on a preliminary list of possible names.**
- **Responding to input from the survey and town hall, the group will work with the Council Member’s staff to develop a step-by-step guide to the process of updating street information on all mail and official documents.**
- **There will be continued communication and transparency in this process, and additional opportunity for public input.**

Ultimately the decision to rename Taney Street, which has stood for 163 years, comes down to City Council: A bill that includes a new name must be passed by Council in order to officially change the name. The volunteer group, along with the neighborhood organizations, continues to work with Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson’s staff to establish precisely how the decision will be made.

The next step in the renaming process, as established by the Council Member’s staff, is to develop a list of “finalists” for the new street name. The final list will be developed by the Rename Taney Coalition, the relevant stakeholders (neighborhood RCOs), and Councilmember Johnson’s staff on the basis of a community survey available here: <https://tinyurl.com/ykc7aykb>. The survey asks residents and neighbors to choose the names they believe belong on the “final ballot” for renaming, and offers the opportunity to suggest alternates. The results of the survey will be distributed and the final name will be the result of another vote. Going forward, the volunteer group and the steering committee from neighborhood RCOs, in collaboration with Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson’s staff, will also establish further steps to communicate the history of Roger Taney and Taney Street through local networks and citywide media. The community engagement survey, which includes the opportunity to propose new names, will remain available for residents to complete at www.renametaney.com.

Based on the input from the survey and the town hall, it is clear that the logistical challenges of updating their address on legal documents and any other providers of mail represents a direct

cost of Taney Street residents' time and energy. In further collaboration with Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson's staff, the group intends to develop a fact sheet that explains the logistics of street name changes, including detailed steps to take to change the name of the street on legal documents when necessary. The USPS forwards mail for ten years when a street name is officially changed. While street renamings are relatively uncommon in Philadelphia, the group will study best practices used elsewhere to ease any hassle costs of renaming.

Finally, the group will continue to actively communicate further information and circulate additional engagement opportunities on the email list and through community group newsletters. Anyone interested in receiving this information directly can sign up for the email list at www.renametaney.com. Any additional questions or feedback should be provided via email to info@renametaney.com or by voice message at (215) 948-2613.