

Committee on State and Local Government

LD 247 - An Act Regarding Recommendations for Changing Place Names in the State

February 12, 2025

Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, and Respected Members of the State and Local Government Committee, my name is Gia Drew. I am the Executive Director of EqualityMaine, which has been representing and advocating for Maine’s LGBTQ+ population since 1984, and I am testifying on behalf of EqualityMaine in support of **LD 247 - An Act Regarding Recommendations for Changing Place Names in the State**.

Maine has been fighting for the changing of offensive place names for nearly fifty years when our first African American State legislator, Representative Gerald E. Talbot signed a bill similar to the one we are discussing today in 1977. More recently in 2000, Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Donald Soctomah sponsored another bill which expanded the definition of an “offensive name”. This bill, however, has not been properly enforced and in the wake of the 25th year since its passing, it is high time we do something about it. There are still five Maine islands that continue to hold offensive names along with countless other locations and places in the state.¹ The establishment of the Maine Board on Place Names as an advisory board would be an effective and representative mechanism in the goal of dismantling racism and racist histories in the state.

As a diverse community of LGBTQ+ individuals we understand what it means to be called an offensive or derogatory name. This is a problem that we as a community have faced for our entire existence. Despite some claims that offensive names are “just words,” scientific evidence shows that being a target of derogatory language is linked to physical and mental health issues, psychosocial and behavioral problems, including alcohol and drug use among youth, and higher

¹ “Offensive Place Names.” PCRITP, www.pcritp.me/node/99. Accessed 09 Feb. 2025.

risk of suicide.² Even those who are not the target of, but more frequently witness derogatory language aimed at a certain community are less willing to have social contact with its members and perceive the language as less offensive and more acceptable.³

Like Meadow Dibble, Executive Director of Atlantic Black Box and Project Lead on the Place Justice project for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations, states, we need to start questioning “How did these racist and offensive place names come to exist? What is their impact on Black and Indigenous people today? What other derogatory racial stereotypes continue to be evoked here, whether in the form of mascots, statues, or signage? How can we, through the process of renaming sites and revising the narratives inscribed on our natural and built environment, help to create more inclusive and equitable communities?”⁴ It is not fair to any community to see their identities so blatantly disrespected and systematically stereotyped in the beautiful state of Maine. We urge you to support this bill, and to vote Ought To Pass on LD 247. Let’s continue the work of reparative actions through the history and naming of Maine places that reflect our state’s belief in all peoples inherent value as humans.

Thank you,

Gia Drew

she/her

² Davis, Jordan P, et al. “Effects of Homophobic Name-Calling and Verbal Sexual Harassment on Substance Use among Young Adults.” *Aggressive Behavior*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2021, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8183603/. Accessed 07 Feb. 2024.

³ Cervone, Carmen, et al. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, vol. 40, no. 1, 28 Dec. 2020, pp. 80–101, doi10.1177/0261927x20967394.

⁴ Dibble, Meadow. “The Permanent Commission’s Place Justice Initiative Seeks to Redress Historical Harms, by Meadow Dibble.” *Wabanaki REACH*, 2022, www.wabanakireach.org/the_permanent_commission_s_place_justice_initiative_seeks_to_redress_historical_harms. Accessed 10 Feb. 2025.