

February 6, 2024

Honorable Chairs Senator Nangle and Representative Stover and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government,

I am writing to express strong support for **LD 1667 - An Act Regarding Recommendations for Changing Place Names in the State**.

For the past year, through the Place Justice initiative, I have conducted research into the history, meaning, and impacts of place names, here in Maine/Wabanaki territory, nationally, and around the world. Through this research and through community conversations, I have come to understand that place names are visible and active signals of a society's values. They send messages about who belongs in a place and to whom the place belongs. Place names have the power to reveal, celebrate, obscure, or denigrate certain histories, people, cultures, and ideas. For instance, many Wabanaki place names contain important information about how to navigate waterways or where to find certain kinds of food. Other names in Maine commemorate religious figures, battles, or the first European settlers. Even though many of us may not be aware of the origins or meanings of the place names where we live, work, or play, they are still influencing our everyday lives. In this light, the fact that Maine does not currently have a clear, accessible, and participatory avenue for naming or renaming places means that the people who call this place home are in effect denied opportunities to shape this important and impactful aspect of our communities.

LD 1667 would establish a Maine Board on Place Names with broad representation and responsibility for establishing clear, participatory processes. The establishment of this board would align Maine with key recommendations put forth by many scholars including Dr. Lauren Beck, who has written extensively on Canada's place names, and by the federal [Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names](#), established by Secretary of the Interior Deborah Haaland's Secretarial Order 3405 and made up of leading place names scholars and practitioners. As part of my research I also conducted a survey of the regulatory structures and statutes pertaining to place naming that are in effect in other states and jurisdictions. With passage of LD 1667 into law, Maine would join other states such as [Colorado](#), which have recognized and made official the critical role of state governments in shepherding place naming processes.

The current place naming process in Maine is particularly problematic when one considers that our state contains many names that are harmful, racist, and/or derogatory. By serving as a liaison with state and federal agencies and a conduit to important information, a Maine Board on Place Names could help communities surface more truthful histories and grapple with what those histories have to say about how to live together today in this place. Whether a community chooses to change a name or acknowledge history in some other way, they deserve the chance to learn, build awareness, and grow together, with the help of a body like the proposed Board. As our colleagues at the [National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers and the Wilderness Society](#) have said,

“We must do better. Place names should not cause harm; they must be equitable and just. They should honor cultural diversity and advance dignity for all people. They should tell an honest history, celebrating and respecting the first Americans— Native Americans—and a fuller array of those who helped build our nation, especially those whose memories have previously been neglected.”

Establishing a Maine Board on Place Names would be an important step in the right direction. I urge you to support LD 1667 to bring Maine into alignment with best practices, bring more voices to the place naming table, and encourage transparent and participatory governance on this front.

Thank you for considering my testimony on this matter.

Sincerely,
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