

Testimony of Osihkiyol Crofton-Macdonald, Board Member, Wabanaki Alliance, in Support of LD 1667 An Act Regarding Recommendations for Changing Place Names in the State Before the State and Local Government Committee, Maine Legislature, February 6, 2024

Distinguished members of the State and Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Osihkiyol Crofton-Macdonald, I am the Tribal Ambassador for the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, a citizen of that nation, and a board member for the Wabanaki Alliance. I testify now as a representative from the Wabanaki Alliance in support of LD 1667. I am also a member of the Place Justice Action Committee.

The impetus behind the creation of this bill was to create a process by which Maine citizens might have a say in addressing problematic place names in their communities. In our work on the Place Justice Action Committee, we had a few examples of citizens wishing they had a say in changing problematic place names here in the State. There is a movement in the State now devoted to removing place names which memorialize slave owners, or place names built upon the oppression of marginalized peoples in other ways. It would be helpful to provide these citizens necessary support and resources.

That issue was deceptively difficult though. The process to change a place name in the State is mostly controlled by local governments. Furthermore, whether or not something is offensive or problematic at all was frequently not something the committee itself could even agree upon. The bill you see before you is a compromise in that regard. It does not override local government and it does not dictate what is offensive and what is not. Instead, it establishes an office that will be devoted to providing citizens resources to make these changes in their own communities. It will also create an Advisory Board manned by people from many different walks of life who can help provide diverse resources and aid.

Right now, the process for addressing problematic place names in Maine is confusing and cumbersome. The creation of an office to oversee place name changes and to help citizens navigate this process is a necessary first step to help citizens create meaningful change in their communities.

To share a specific example, an elementary school class in Camden recently reached out to the Houlton Band of Maliseets for help with a project they wanted to pursue. They wanted to include more Wabanaki place names in their hometown. What seemed like a straightforward idea has become a long a difficult journey for them. They have taken it upon themselves to reach out to many different resources and have spoken with their local town council, but they still have a long way to go. A specific office in Augusta devoted to place names and able to help them navigate these issues would be a wonderful resource for people like these elementary school students who just want to create some positive change in their communities.

This bill can be a meaningful first step in helping our own Maine citizens gain access to valuable tools and resources to create meaningful change in their communities.

We recommend you vote Ought to Pass in support of LD 1667.

Woliwon