



Permanent Commission RACIAL, INDIGENOUS & TRIBAL POPULATIONS

LD1667 “An Act Regarding Recommendations for Changing Place Names in the State”

February 06, 2024

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and Honorable Members of the State and Local Government Committee.

My name is Rae Sage, and I am the Policy Coordinator for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. The Permanent Commission’s role is to examine racial disparities across all systems and advise Maine State Government on ways to improve the status and outcomes of historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations.

The Permanent Commission supports LD 1667 because it creates an equitable process to develop, oversee, and publicize the process to name or rename places within the state. The current process in Maine for addressing derogatory place names is unclear and cumbersome. LD 1667 creates a diverse and inclusive Maine Board on Place Names, which will serve as an advisory council to the Maine liaison to the United States Board on Geographic Names (USBGN).

The proposed process is an extension of the work that the Permanent Commission was directed to undertake under Public Law 2002, Chapter 149 to develop a process to assist with proposals to the USBGN.¹ The USBGN works with State Names Authorities (SNA) throughout the country to coordinate place name change proposals. In Maine, the SNA is not a formal position, but is currently a volunteer role filled by the Maine Office of GIS. There is no mandate for this work, nor an advisory body to

¹ PL 2022, Ch 149: <https://legislature.maine.gov/backend/App/services/getDocument.aspx?documentId=91542>

support it. In order to formalize and support this work, other states are increasingly shifting to a board structure. This ensures that a range of voices are included in the process. The proposed Maine Board on Place Names includes a range of individuals with expertise in the history of our state, including the members of Wabanaki tribes and individuals who specialize in the history and culture of Maine's diverse populations.

Whatever our color, background, or zip code, we want to live in communities that reflect honesty about who we are and integrity in how we treat others. The names we give mountains, waterways, and townships shape our understanding and relationship to these places. As United States Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland said, "Words matter, particularly in our work to ensure our nation's public land and waters are accessible and welcoming to people of all backgrounds."²

The people, ideas, and phrases we choose to memorialize are a strong indicator of our communities' shared values. These words tell the story of local collective identity, defining who feels welcome, safe, and connected to the land. The discussion of changing place names is a complex one in need of nuanced evaluation. LD 1667 provides the necessary infrastructure for such an evaluation, making sure all voices are heard in matters that impact us all.

²US Department of the Interior. (2023). Interior Department Completes Vote to Remove Derogatory Names from Five Locations
<https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-completes-vote-remove-derogatory-names-five-locations>