

Maine Climate Action **NOW!**

To: Maine Legislature Committee on State and Local Government
From: Ezra Sassaman, Advocacy Coordinator, Maine Climate Action Now
Date: February 6, 2024
Re: LD 1667: An Act Regarding Recommendations for Changing Place Names in the State

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Ezra Sassaman. I am a resident of Bar Harbor and the Advocacy Coordinator for Maine Climate Action Now (MCAN), a statewide coalition of climate justice and youth-led organizations from across the state.

An important part of climate justice is ensuring all people, regardless of background, feel represented in the places they call home. Place names may at first glance be trivial, but are an important part of our shared culture. How areas are named, and who and what they honor, communicate the values we hold as a state.

For example, traditional Wabanaki names of places around the state often describe rivers, water, tides, ledges, eel-catching, fish, and other wildlife¹ – signifying the values of living in harmony with and being grounded by the natural world. These are values Maine Climate Action Now holds as crucially important, especially as we work to mitigate and prevent the worst effects of the climate crisis.

Today, some areas of the state do not even have names, just “T and number” township designations that constitute a grid pattern meant for forest management and resource extraction. These colonial-era names replaced Wabanaki values of harmony with nature and instead evoke the history of turning the natural world into profit.²³

Other places are named for individuals that took part in slavery and/or brutal colonization – practices that must no longer be honored and celebrated. Elevating individuals who participated in these acts unfortunately honors their legacies. We should thoughtfully reconsider this symbolic uplifting of their outdated worldviews.

¹ Emily Burnham, “[Wabanaki place names are everywhere in Maine](#)”, *Bangor Daily News*, October 9, 2023. Accessed February 6, 2024.

² “After the Revolutionary War, a larger wave of settlers pushed inland, quilting southern and central Maine with farms and in the process clearing more than three million acres of forest.” Andrew Barton et al., “[Reconstructing the Past: Maine Forests Then and Now](#)”, *Northern Woodlands*, July 3, 2013. Accessed February 6, 2024.

³ “By 1820, farming and lumbering vied with fishing and shipbuilding as the major occupations. Settlers converted hundreds of acres of trees into wood products ranging from schooners and barns to baby cribs and hand tools.” National Park Service, [Colonization and Settlement](#), *NPS.gov*, Accessed Feb 6. 2024.

Maine Climate Action **NOW!**

Maine history contains many complexities and there is no one right answer when it comes to changing outdated names. That is why it is especially important to convene a group of experts with diverse knowledge and backgrounds to make decisions about who and what is elevated to become place names in our state. In this regard, LD 1667 is on exactly the right track.

For the above reasons, our coalition encourages an “ought-to-pass” recommendation on LD 1667. Thank you.

Ezra Sassaman
Maine Climate Action Now
LD 1667

To: Maine Legislature Committee on State and Local Government
From: Ezra Sassaman, Advocacy Coordinator, Maine Climate Action Now
Date: February 6, 2024
Re: LD 1667: An Act Regarding Recommendations for Changing Place Names in the State

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Ezra Sassaman. I am a resident of Bar Harbor and the Advocacy Coordinator for Maine Climate Action Now (MCAN), a statewide coalition of climate justice and youth-led organizations from across the state.

An important part of climate justice is ensuring all people, regardless of background, feel represented in the places they call home. Place names may at first glance be trivial, but are an important part of our shared culture. How areas are named, and who and what they honor, communicate the values we hold as a state.

For example, traditional Wabanaki names of places around the state often describe rivers, water, tides, ledges, eel-catching, fish, and other wildlife – signifying the values of living in harmony with and being grounded by the natural world. These are values Maine Climate Action Now holds as crucially important, especially as we work to mitigate and prevent the worst effects of the climate crisis.

Today, some areas of the state do not even have names, just “T and number” township designations that constitute a grid pattern meant for forest management and resource extraction. These colonial-era names replaced Wabanaki values of harmony with nature and instead evoke the history of turning the natural world into profit.

Other places are named for individuals that took part in slavery and/or brutal colonization – practices that must no longer be honored and celebrated. Elevating individuals who participated in these acts unfortunately honors their legacies. We should thoughtfully reconsider this symbolic uplifting of their outdated worldviews. Maine history contains many complexities and there is no one right answer when it comes to changing outdated names. That is why it is especially important to convene a group of experts with diverse knowledge and backgrounds to make decisions about who and what is elevated to become place names in our state. In this regard, LD 1667 is on exactly the right track.

For the above reasons, our coalition encourages an “ought-to-pass” recommendation on LD 1667. Thank you.