

Ontario Geographic Names Board

Principles of Geographic Naming

1. INTRODUCTION

Geographical names – or toponyms – are the result of the interaction between people and the land they inhabit. As civilisations attempt to relate to their natural environment, they attribute names to geographical features for identification and referencing purposes. Names can commemorate great persons and important events, but preserved in each name is the evidence of centuries of exploration and settlement, and the diversity of our cultural origins. Used extensively in orientation and navigation for thousands of years, names also communicate vital information about the landscape around us, including the distribution of our natural resources. They evoke great public interest and aid future generations to maintain vital connections to their past. As such, toponyms form an essential part of the cultural heritage of all Ontarians.

1.1 OFFICIAL GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

As settlement in Canada grew, the need of an authoritative body to record and disseminate information concerning geographical names became evident. Established in 1897, the Geographic Board of Canada began to standardize and officialize the geographical nomenclature of the country. Post offices and railway stations were usually given short, unambiguous designations to lower administration costs and to ensure confusion over names would not develop. Feature and place names began to appear together on maps, signs and publications to facilitate communication. As the country developed, regional and local differences became apparent, and the responsibility for geographic names as well as some government functions was transferred to the provinces and later onto the territories. For some jurisdictions, language and culture were as important to official naming as orientation and navigation.

Ontario is an excellent example of a Canadian jurisdiction with vibrant cultural diversity. This province boasts a rich and diverse history especially when it comes to matters of naming. Official names in Ontario show the equal and special significance of a number of groups who are responsible for its development, including the First Nations, the first people of this land, whose names demonstrate their intimate connection with the land for thousands of years and the French and English speech communities whose history in our province dates back to the early 1600's.

1.2 THE ONTARIO GEOGRAPHIC NAMES BOARD

Passage of the Ontario Geographic Names Board Act of 1968 by the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario provided for the establishment of the Province's first independent geographical names and naming authority. The Board gathers, records and disseminates information respecting names of places and geographical features within the province; recommends to the Minister of Natural Resources for approval the names of geographical features; and orders into the record the names of places. The Board also records geographic place names and certain cultural feature names into the record that are approved by other naming authorities including: municipal names; provincial park names; geographic township names; First Nation lands; federal names such as Post Office, Railway Station, National Park, and Military Base names, amongst others. The Board does not record the names of other cultural features such as roads, trails, dams, amongst others, but is available to advise on matters relating to toponymy and to geographical naming in general.

Names recommended by the Board, approved by the Minister of Natural Resources and entered into the Board record are official for all provincial and federal maps, charts, gazetteers and related publications.

2. NAMING PRINCIPLES

The eventual recommendations and decisions of the Ontario Geographic Names Board are guided by long-standing principles whose application to specific naming recommendations is tempered by the collective opinions of its members. Many of the Board's principles have evolved from national and international naming conventions, and often balance efficient and effective communication with the needs and traditions of the various cultural groups in the province.

2.1 PRIMARY PRINCIPLES

The decisions of the Board are guided by the following primary principles, which take precedence over any other principles unless there are convincing reasons to the contrary.

2.2 UNIVOCITY

The univocity principle recognizes only one official name for a geographical entity at one time in any one language. This is an international principle, adopted by the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (1967). In subscribing to the univocity principle, the Board strives to assure that no geographical entity within its jurisdiction is referenced by more than one official name at one time, in any one language. Where multiple languages prevail, a name may be recognized officially in each language (See 2.5).

2.3 CURRENT LOCAL USAGE

A name in local usage is a name known to be used in the area immediately associated with the geographical entity. The Board gives first consideration to names that are well established and in current local usage. Ideally, for efficient and effective communication especially on maps, signs and texts, the Board supports the idea of one name for one feature, at any one time, in any one language (univocity). If more than one name is in use for a feature in a single language, the Board will normally select the name that in its opinion, has enjoyed the widest, most well established local use and acceptance – so long as that name has been in wide, well-established use for at least 20 years and the name meets other Board principles.

2.4 CURRENT COMMON USAGE

A name in common usage is a name known to be used beyond the area immediately associated with the geographical entity. In the absence of a name in current local usage, the Board gives consideration to a name that is well established in current common usage.

2.5 MULTIPLE NAMES IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Dual and alternate naming recognizes the special significance of the peoples of our province including the original First Nations, and later French and English speaking settlers. Realistically, features in Ontario are sometime known by different names in different languages. Where two or more names enjoy well-established usage in different languages for the same geographic entity, the Board may consider the adoption of two or more of the names.

(a) Official Name and Alternate Official Name(s)

- Where one name enjoys greater local usage than others it will normally be recommended as the Official Name and the other(s) will be recommended as the Alternate Official Name(s).
- Alternate Official Names are normally shown on maps in brackets beside or under the Official Name – space permitting.

(b) Dual Naming

- Although applied cautiously by the Board, where two names enjoy more or less equally well-established usage, the Board may consider the adoption of both names as a single name separated by a forward slash. As both parts of the single name enjoy equal status, this process conforms to the international principle of univocity – one name for one place.
- In exceptional circumstances or where wholesale replacement of names may lead to confusion especially in emergency situations, a Dual Name may also be recommended in areas where current local or common usage is relatively small, but the established local or

common names are well-documented in maps and in text of the dominant language group or are of special and/or extraordinary significance to another language group in the province, e.g., First Nation names and French names on early English exploration maps of Ontario; names of First Nation spiritual sites; names applied to features to commemorate World War casualties, amongst others.

- In recognition of rights of first discovery, the Board normally places the First Nation segment of the dual name first.

2.6 NAMING IN ABSENCE OF 20 YEAR, WELL-ESTABLISHED LOCAL USAGE

New names are sometimes required to meet special situations such as the implementation of 911 emergency service systems. Where the Board has recognized the need for an official name, and the proposed name does not meet those principles listed above, the Board gives consideration to the following types of names for geographical entities in the order listed below:

- (a) Original First Nation name of the feature or placed to be named;
- (b) A name descriptive of the geographical entity that has been in well-established local use;
- (c) The restoration of a name established in the historical or traditional record;
- (d) A name that commemorates an historical event or tradition directly associated with the geographical entity; or,
- (e) A name that commemorates a person (see section 3.1 below).

3. NAMES COMMEMORATING PERSONS

The decisions of the Board to recommend and approve names commemorating persons are guided by the following:

3.1 Legacy of the Area

The Board will consider a name for a geographical entity in honour of a person who has made a significant contribution to the legacy of the area where the entity is located.

3.2 Legacy of the Province

The Board will consider a name for a geographical entity in honour of a person who has made a significant contribution to the legacy of the Province.

3.3 Legacy of the Country

The Board will consider a name for a geographical entity in honour of a person who has made a significant contribution to the legacy of the Country.

3.4 Service to the Country

The Board will consider a name for a geographical entity in honour of an Ontarian who has lost his or her life in a Canadian wartime or overseas peace keeping operation.

3.5 Acceptance

The Board will strive to assure that a name commemoration meets with the adequate support of the local or general public, and the appropriate municipal, provincial or national interest.

3.6 Living Persons

The Board does not support commemorative naming of a living person.

3.7 Deceased Persons

A person must be deceased at least 5 years before the Board will consider a commemorative name proposal.

3.8 Victims of Accidents or Tragedies

A commemorative name will not be used to commemorate the victim of an accident or tragedy unless the individual has contributed to the legacy of the area (3.1), legacy of the Province (3.2), legacy of the Country (3.3), or service to the Country (3.4).

3.9 Limits on Commemorative Naming of Persons

A commemorative name for an individual will not be considered for adoption if:

- (a) a well-established and acceptable name already exists for the feature,
- (b) a geographic feature or place has already been named after the individual in Ontario.

4. NAMES COMMEMORATING EVENTS

The decisions of the Board to recommend and approve names commemorating events are guided by the following:

4.1 Significance to Area, Province or Country

The Board will consider a name for a geographical entity to commemorate an event that was significant to

- (a) the area,
- (b) the Province,
- (c) the Country.

4.2 Elapsed Time

Ten years must have elapsed since the occurrence of the event before the Board will consider a commemorative name proposal.

4.3 Limits on Commemorative Naming of Events

A commemorative name for an event will not be considered for adoption if:

- (a) a well-established and acceptable name already exists for the feature,
- (b) a geographic feature or place has already been named after the event in Ontario.

5. OTHER PRINCIPLES

The decisions of the Board to recommend and approve names are further guided by the following:

5.1 Ownership of Land

The Board does not consider the ownership of land, in itself, to be grounds for promoting a particular name for a geographical entity.

5.2 Unacceptable Names

The Board will not recommend a name that it considers:

- (i) as derogatory; or
- (ii) might be construed as advertising or otherwise promoting a commercial enterprise or product.

5.3 Orthography

The Board will assure that the spelling and accenting of a geographical name agree with the rules of the language in which it is written. Exceptions to this rule will be properly documented. Where no standard orthography for a language exists, the Board may recommend the approval of names in a local orthography sanctioned by the local community and government.

5.4 Name Duplication

The Board will strive to avoid the duplication of names for different geographical entities that are sufficiently close to each other to cause potential confusion.

5.5 Complex Features

The Board may consider the adoption of different names for different parts or extensions of what may be considered a single geographical feature.

5.6 Distinguishing Terms

Where a name is a source of confusion because:

- (i) it has been applied to two or more geographical entities of the same kind, in what is regarded to be in the same geographical area; or,
- (ii) it is used as a single name for a geographically complex feature made up of separate parts;

The Board may consider modifying the name by applying a suitably distinguishing term (e.g., upper, lower, big, little).