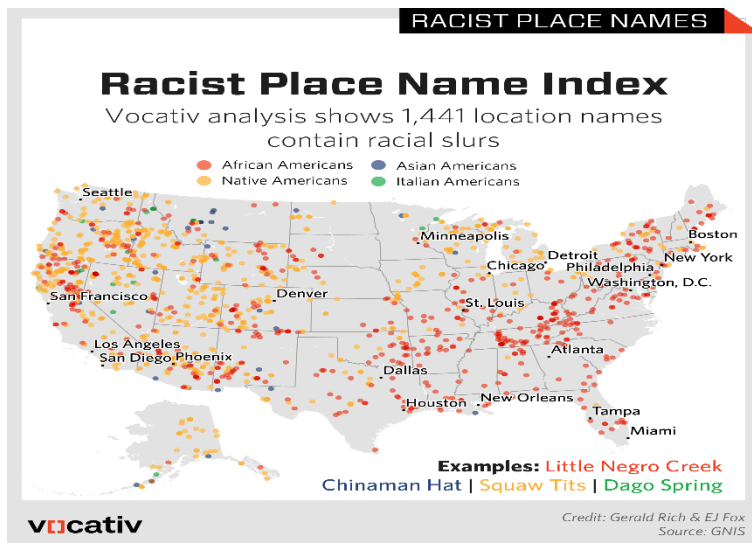




Natural Resource Committee, Subcommittee on Parks, Natural Parks, Forest and Public Lands  
Legislative Hearing  
Commissioner Rodney Ellis Testimony  
H.R. 4544 “The Reconciliation in Place Names Act”

**Background and Overview**

There are more than a thousand racially offensive names of creeks, rivers, cliffs and other geographic features in Texas and across the country. According to the Geographic Names Information System that is maintained by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN), at least 1,400 units of federally owned public land contain racially offensive terms in their title such as Negro, Redman, Wetback, Squaw, Bitch, Darkey, Chink, Coon, Redskin, Dead Negro, Dead Indian, and Chinaman. These are just a few of the derogatory and offensive names. There are over 400 units of public land with the word Negro in its title. *Please see figure #1 entitled “Racist Place Names Index” map.*



Across the country, local governments and groups are challenging names they deem offensive or inappropriate. These campaigns extend well beyond national parks: schools, university halls, streets and other landmarks are being renamed to honor overlooked historical figures and remove these names and symbols that dehumanize marginalized communities. Given the current moment in our history and our collective efforts to reconcile a racist past, now is the time to change these names.

Figure 1 “Racist Place Names Index”



### **Commissioner Ellis’s State and Local Efforts to Change Racially Offensive Names of Public Land**

For nearly thirty years, Commissioner Rodney Ellis has advocated to change offensive names of public lands. In 1991, then State Senator Rodney Ellis cosponsored Texas House Bill 1756, introduced by Sam Hudson, which was signed into state law on August 26, 1991.<sup>1</sup> The bill called for the elimination of racially offensive names of creeks, rivers, lakes, ponds, bays, coves, hills, and other geographic features by directing the Director of the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDot) to submit an application to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) to change the name of 19 sites with the word “Negro” included in its name, as well as other sites not explicitly listed but still contain the word “Negro”. Despite legislation at the state level that should have changed these names in 1991, only three of these were actually renamed in the thirty years since the bill’s passage.

Last year, Commissioner Ellis and State Representative Ronald Reynolds contacted the Texas Department of Transportation and the Texas Geographic Names Committee requesting a meeting to discuss efforts to change the names of public land in Texas with the word “Negro” in its title and to inquire about why the names remained despite the 1991 legislation that passed. After several meetings with relevant state departments and agencies, Commissioner Ellis learned that the United States Board of Geographic Names denied the name change application because of the lack of documentation of community support. The relevant state agencies then refiled applications to change the names, which BGN formally approved in the late summer of 2021.

To bolster the applications, several state and local actions took place. The Texas Black Legislative Caucus sent a letter to the U.S. Board of Geographic Names in support of the name change application for the sites with the word Negro in it. Harris County passed a resolution in support of the applications to change offensive names in Harris County. Local press outlets and national press such as the *Washington Post* covered the fact that several sites in the State of Texas still contained names with the word “Negro,” in its title despite the 1991 law.

Finally, on June 10, 2021, Commissioner Ellis convened Rep. Al Green, State Sen. Borris Miles, and State Rep. Ron Reynolds for a press conference in front of the NAACP-Houston Chapter Headquarter calling on the BGN to change the names of racially offensive land throughout the state and nation at large. Commissioner Ellis then stated:

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Legislature. HB. 1756. 72 (R). Available at: <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=72R&Bill=HB1756>



*“This day has been a long time coming, but I am proud to see this change finally happen. In this moment of racial reckoning, we must follow up our verbal commitments to racial justice with action . . . I commend the U.S. Board on Geographic Names for taking bold and swift action, and speeding up this process over the past few months so that the state of Texas no longer has these 16 geographical sites that bear the racist and offensive word ‘negro’ in them.*

*However, the work is not done. Since the original legislation, 11 other sites were identified in Texas with the term ‘negro’ in them located on private land. Across our country there are still hundreds of geographic sites that with racially offensive names that target Black, Hispanic, and Native communities. I hope that the USBGN will build on the progress made today in Texas, and work with other groups across the country to ensure that all racially offensive names are erased from the public domain.”*

As a result of the actions by Commissioner Ellis, State Representatives and other local leaders, the name change applications for the state of Texas were approved to change the names to honor notable African Americans in the state of Texas. An old site called Negrohead Creek now honors Henry Doyle, one of the first practicing African American attorneys the Houston community. Please see Figure 2 “New Names of Notable African Americans”

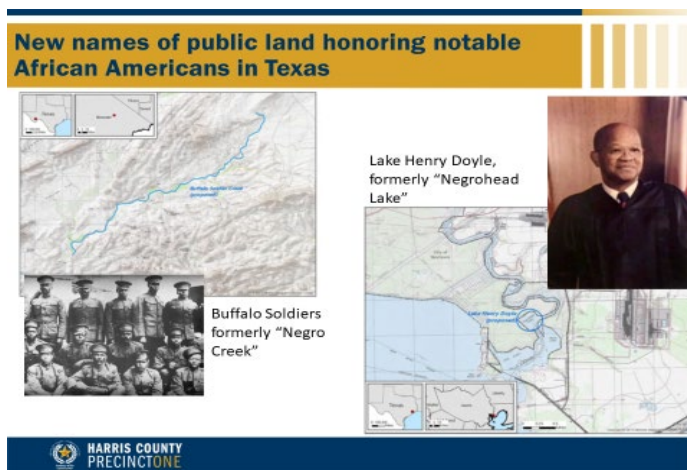


Figure 2 “New Names of Notable African Americans”

### **United States Board of Geographic Names (BGN)**

The process to change these names is cumbersome and requires community input for alternative replacement names. BGN denies applications for name changes for various reasons such as incomplete applications from state and local governments that do not include evidence of community support, insufficient or irrelevant replacement names, local objection to new proposed names, and views from BGN that the current name (rather offensive or not) is considered



historically accurate and therefore appropriate. When applications are denied, derogatory geographic names remain in place.

The BGN states that there must be a compelling reason and discourages name changes unless necessary. The BGN further states that “*Changing a name merely to correct or re-establish historical usage is not in and of itself a reason to change a name.*”<sup>2</sup>

There is a precedent for widespread name changes. In 1962, the federal government ordered that the offensive term “Nigger” be replaced with “Negro” in all geographic names,<sup>3</sup> which at the time was an acceptable reference to Black Americans. Now it is time to change these names again, as “Negro” is offensive and inappropriate in the names of geographic features.

According to the Geographic Names Information System that is maintained by the BGN, **there are several hundreds of geographic features that contain the word “Negro” throughout the country.**<sup>4</sup> In the past, many offensive names such as “Dead Negro Draw” or “Negro Hollow” were not approved by the BGN for a name change.<sup>5</sup>

#### **H.R. 4544, the Reconciliation in Place Names Act**

This year, U.S. House Representative Al Green reintroduced H.R. 4554, the Reconciliation in Place Names Act that would create a more accountable and transparent process by which the BGN would review and revise offensive names of federal land. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, the first indigenous cabinet member, introduced this legislation last Congress. This bill directs the Department of the Interior to establish the Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names to advise the Board on Geographic Names. In H.R. 4554, Congress finds that the United States includes derogatory names that are offensive to ethnic and minority groups, as well as sexual slurs. Often, the first step of reconciliation is acknowledging the harm done to a community.

The federal government, must take bold leadership on this issue, and pass H.R. 4544, the *Reconciliation in Place Names Act*. Without direction from the federal government and explicit guidance to certain communities, these derogatory names will not change. As with integration and desegregation, voting rights, and other civil rights issues in this country, the onus often falls on the federal government to step up and do the right thing. It is the government’s responsibility

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Question and Answers Page. Available at: <https://www.usgs.gov/core-science-systems/ngp/board-on-geographic-names/how-do-i>

<sup>3</sup> NYT. *Texas Journal, On Geographic Names and Cleaning Them Up*. February 14, 1990. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/14/us/texas-journal-on-geographic-names-and-cleaning-them-up.html>

<sup>4</sup> The two locations in Harris County were the Houston Negro Hospital School of Nursing Building and Negrohead Lake.

<sup>5</sup> USBGN “Action List”. Available at: [https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=GEONAMES\\_WEB:REVIEW\\_LISTS:.....](https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=GEONAMES_WEB:REVIEW_LISTS:.....)



to ensure that marginalized groups are protected and advocated for, especially concerning the names of federal lands.

**Conclusion**

The longstanding process of the BGN has not worked for the people most affected. There are still hundreds of names that are offensive to Blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and women. The continued use of these racist and derogatory names inherently suggests that racist and offensive language is acceptable in public settings and is condoned by the federal government.

Congress cannot let the BGN take a passive approach and wait until localities find a replacement name for offensive names of geographic features. If this Committee agrees that these offensive names are unacceptable, then it must move swiftly and creatively to change them by passing H.R. 4544, the Reconciliation in Place Names Act.

Please direct any questions relating to this written testimony to my staff Janae Ladet, Lead Policy Advisor at [Janae.Ladet@cp1.hctx.net](mailto:Janae.Ladet@cp1.hctx.net).



**Attachment 1: Table of Derogatory Names of Geographic Features**

<i>Instances of Derogatory Names of Geographic Features</i>	
Squaw	495
Bitch	7
Negro	404
Chinaman	22
Whorehouse Meadow	1
Redman	49
Darkey	2
Wetback	1
Greaser	10
Polack	3
Dago	13
Chink	2
Dead Indian	12
Dead Negro	1
Dead Injun	1
Coon	603

*Based on Preliminary Analysis of BGN Data. Retrieved by Precinct 1 Policy Staff on October 7, 2021*



**Attachment 2: Washington Post. Texas lawmakers again urge federal board to remove ‘Negro’ from place names in state**

SAN ANTONIO — Growing up in the Houston suburb of Baytown, city council member Charles Johnson never knew that there was a lake in the community named "Negrohead." Nor did he know that its original name was an even more offensive version that included the "n-word."

Johnson, who is Black, said he was “shocked and saddened” to learn the information. But there are more than two dozen natural features across the state that have similarly racially offensive names, such as Negrohead Bluff and Negro Creek, according to state lawmakers.

Legislators thought they had fixed the issue some 30 years ago [when they passed a measure](#) urging the federal government to remove “Negro” from the place names. They revisited the issue in the recent legislative session after learning the changes had not been made and approved a new resolution again calling for the term to be removed from sites.

But the resolution is just a recommendation. It’s up to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, a little-known interdepartmental agency, to make the changes. The panel will meet Thursday to vote on removing the word from 16 sites. Supporters are hopeful. Last year, as a congresswoman representing New Mexico, Deb Haaland [introduced a bill](#) urging the federal board to review offensive names. Now, as the Interior Secretary, she oversees the board.

“African Americans should not have to drive anywhere in the country that they helped form and built and have to be insulted with the word ‘Negro,’ ” said state Sen. Borris Miles (D), who wrote [Senate Concurrent Resolution 29](#). “I think it’s a bigger insult that this bill was passed [30] years ago . . . and nothing’s been done about it today. So that’s why we’re back in front and insisting.”

[\*Texas bill to ban teaching of critical race theory puts teachers on front lines of culture war over how history is taught\*](#)

Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis, a former Democratic state senator who co-sponsored the 1991 name-change legislation, discovered last year that the sites’ names had not been changed, despite his efforts decades ago. He alerted state lawmakers, urging them to try again.

“The term Negro in contemporary times is as offensive to most African Americans as the other n-word,” Ellis said. “It just implies you ought to be subservient, you’re not quite on the same level as other people. “The Board on Geographic names said the initial request was rejected because of a lack of local support where the sites are located. They are



largely in remote areas with no signage to indicate their federally registered name, and are on public and private property.

If the changes are approved, the new names would appear on the federal registry, which companies like Apple and Google rely on for their maps services, said Jennifer Runyon, a member of the panel's research staff. However, private landowners and municipalities could still choose to call the sites by their old names.

The 16 sites to be voted on Thursday are among 19 that were included in the original 1991 legislation. Two of those — Negroes Liberty Settlement in Liberty County and Negro Crossing in Tom Green County — are communities that no longer exist and have been taken off maps, Runyon said. The other, Negro Pond in Montgomery County, was changed in 2018 after the local officials submitted a request. It is now called Emancipation Pond, Runyan said.

She said it's possible state lawmakers are waiting to see what happens with these 16 sites before adding the remaining 10-plus sites included in this year's resolution. No board members have asked staff to contact local officials to confirm support for changing the names this time around, Runyan said, a process that led to the panel's decision to reject the request made in the 1991.

Ellis said bipartisan legislative support should be enough to convince the panel, and he criticized the bureaucracy involved in the process. "If it's so easy to give an awful name, why isn't it so easy to change that name?" he said. Natural sites with racial slurs in their names are pervasive throughout the United States.

A 2015 analysis by [the data media company Vocativ found](#) more than 1,400 such sites by cross-referencing registered sites with names in the [Racial Slur Database](#). Of those, 558 were names offensive to Black Americans, the majority of them using the word "Negro." Asian American and Native American slurs were also pervasive, the analysis found. A [search on the U.S. Geological Survey website](#) shows more than 700 places with the word "Negro" in them, though some could be referencing the Spanish word for the color black, which is spelled the same way and devoid of racial connotations.

"Racism has put its roots into so many things you don't even realize, like streets and parks and creeks and rivers, and that's something that is really sad," said Janae Ladet, Ellis's lead policy adviser.

Many of the Texas sites used to have names with the n-word until the federal board replaced it with Negro in 1963.





State Rep. James White (R), who co-wrote the House bill, said he views the issue from the perspective of a geography teacher — his former profession.

[\*After defeating restrictive voting bill, Texas Democrats send loud message: 'We need Congress to do their part'\*](#)

“I wouldn’t want one of our great geography teachers to be in a situation like that, to have to explain or try to explain why these places in the great state of Texas are named as such,” said White, who is Black.

White opposes other efforts to remove painful symbols of the state’s past, such as moving Confederate monuments from Capitol grounds, but renaming sites is different, he said.

“I’m not for tearing down, moving around, devaluing our history,” White said. “I’m not for that, but that’s not really what this was about. These names initially had very disparaging, disrespectful nomenclature. Someone thought by changing it to ‘Negro’ from the former disparaging name was acceptable, but it was not.”

Last year, the Baytown City Council took matters into its own hands and voted to change its lake’s name to Lake Henry Doyle, after a judge who was the first graduate of the former Texas State University for Negroes law school, which is now Texas Southern University’s Thurgood Marshall School of Law. Local officials submitted letters of support to the Board on Geographic Names to improve its chances of approval Thursday.

“It’s important for me to see the name of this lake changed not only for myself but for my children and my community,” said Johnson, the council member. “For those who came before me to witness this change in attitude and heart, and more importantly, to see a wrong made right, it’s beyond words.”