

Congressman Al Green Testimony on H.R. 4454 – Reconciliation in Place Names

Thank you, Chairman Joe Neguse and all the members of the Subcommittee, for considering H.R. 4454, the Reconciliation of Place Names Act. I also thank Secretary Haaland for introducing this legislation in the 116th Congress, the cosponsors on the legislation, and the 27-endorsing organizations, including: The National Congress of American Indians, The Wilderness Society, The Hispanic Access Foundation, NativeOutdoors, Defenders of Wildlife, The Geological Society of America, The American Geophysical Union (AGU), and the American Association of Geographers.

I want to thank my friend, Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis, for his decades of support to this cause. I also want to thank Secretary Haaland for introducing this legislation in the 116th Congress and Senator Warren in the Senate for introducing a companion in the Senate this Congress.

Minstrel characters and other denigrating portrayals rooted in unfounded disparaging stereotypes have for too long dehumanized minorities and people of color in the United States. Our nation has a cruel history of using invidious discriminatory terminology to define and demean marginalized communities. This is evidenced in multiple facets of American life from heralded household brands to our landscape and geography. Derogatory terms such as ‘negro,’ ‘squaw,’ ‘Chinaman,’ and ‘Redskin’ have been included in the geographical names of public places across our nation.

These appellations are pernicious relics from the era of invidious, yet lawful, discrimination. During that era, white supremacists imposed pernicious appellations on minorities and people of color as a tool of suppression and subjugation. They dishonor our constitution while debasing our nation.

Last summer, after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, the zeitgeist of our time became imbued with a racial awakening as it’s hallmark. Private companies rebranded decades-old racist caricatures, names, and logos as well as other representations of onerosity.

The federal government must take up the same just cause by renaming and rebranding any structure or geographic feature with a pernicious appellation that is maintained by taxpayer dollars. Currently, the United States Board on Geographic Names oversees all naming processes and decisions. While Board policies authorize changing the names of offensive geographic features, the current process is time-consuming, is underfunded and is ill-equipped to address the vast nature of the problem.

The Reconciliation in Place Names Act would specifically do the following:

- It would create a 17-member advisory board composed of individuals with backgrounds in civil rights and race relations, to bring a depth of knowledge and experience to the process.
- It would solicit proposals from tribal nations, state and local governments, and members of the public, and would provide an opportunity for the public to comment on name change proposals.
- It would require the advisory board to make recommendations to the Board for renaming and to make recommendations to Congress for renaming Federal land units with offensive names.

Thank you.