

13 March 2023
English
Original: French

**United Nations Group of Experts
on Geographical Names**

Session 2023

New York, May 1–5, 2023

Item 7 of the Provisional Agenda *

**Social and economic benefits, supporting sustainable
development, measures taken and proposed for the
implementation of resolutions and evaluation of the work of the Group of Experts**

Adoption of a policy on changes of place name

Submitted by Canada**

Summary:

The Commission de toponymie du Québec is the body responsible for the management of place names in Québec. It has a mandate to formalize and disseminate Québec place names. Since its founding, the Commission has adopted various policies on place names, which provide the basis for its decisions and which are disseminated on its website.

The Commission attaches great importance to the stability of place names, in line with the principle of name usage: names that are in use are more effective geographical reference points than those that are not. Respect for current usage is one of the cornerstones of the Commission's policies and is a prerequisite for place names.

However, many proposed name changes are submitted to the Commission or reported in the media without any solid justification.

Therefore, on 3 March 2022, the Commission adopted a new place-name policy: the policy on changes of place names. The new policy is aimed at meeting the need to clarify the principles that guide the Commission in the effective and uniform handling of proposed name changes.

The report covers the details of the new policy, the basic principles of which are as follows:

- Place names with the most well-established use must have priority.
- The stability of the official gazetteer is prioritized so as to ensure the maintenance and reliability of geographical reference points.

* GEGN.2/2023/23

** Prepared by Marie-Ève Bisson, Commission de toponymie du Québec, Canada

- The Commission has no desire to provoke or encourage controversy; its preference is to seek broad consensus and compromise.
- The Commission may refuse to approve any proposed change to a place name if it deems it to be contrary to the public interest, based on personal motives or of a promotional nature.
- Consideration is given to the fact that the addition of a name may enhance the official gazetteer and also the fact that the replacement of an old name may represent a loss for place-name heritage.

Adoption of a policy on place name changes

Resolution related to this document

VI/9 Recognition of national standardization

Secondary resolutions:

III/16 National standardization

VIII/2 Commemorative naming practices for geographical features

X/3 Criteria for establishing and evaluating the nature of geographical names as cultural heritage

X/4 Discouraging the commercialization of geographical names

Background

By their very nature, geographical names bridge spaces and languages and are both supports for science and vehicles for culture. It is on this duality that the management and enhancement of Québec's toponymic heritage is based, for which the Commission de toponymie du Québec is responsible. The Commission's mandate is to catalogue, standardize, officialize, preserve and publish Québec place names.

The policies that guide the Commission in carrying out its mandate are based on these fundamental considerations. Since its inception, the Commission has adopted five place-name policies, which provide the basis for its decisions and which are published on its website (toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/normes-procedures/politiques-toponymiques/):

- Standardization policy;
- Language policy;
- Terminology policy;
- Indigenous place names policy;
- Commemorative naming policy.

Respect for common usage, a fundamental criterion in toponymy, is one of the cornerstones of the Commission's policies. The Commission attaches great importance to the stability of place names, in line with the principle of name usage: names that are in use are more effective geographical reference points than those that are not.

The United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names have adopted a number of resolutions that address toponymy as part of a nation's cultural heritage and the necessity to preserve toponymic heritage. It is generally recognized that the preservation of toponymic heritage is key to achieving sustainable development objectives.

However, projects to change names without sound justification are regularly submitted to the Commission or reported in the media.

In particular, territorial marketing, an increasingly popular practice, threatens the stability of the names of inhabited areas as administrations seek to attract more residents or businesses by branding their place names. In other cases, there is an attempt to claim ownership of a territory by giving it a more personal name, or simply to give someone's name, as a tribute, to a place that already has an official name.

Consequently, on March 3, 2022, the Commission adopted a new toponymic policy in addition to the five previously mentioned policies: the *Politique relative aux changements de noms de lieux* ("Policy on changes of place names").

This new policy is aimed at meeting the need to clarify the principles that guide the Commission in the effective and uniform handling of proposed name changes. The posting of the Commission's new policy should adequately inform the public and representatives of the administration of its position on this matter.

Guiding principles

- Priority should be given to place names with the most well-established usage.
- The Commission shall encourage the stability of official toponymic nomenclature in order to ensure that geographical reference points are maintained and reliable.
- The Commission does not wish to create or encourage controversy; the pursuit of a broad consensus and the best possible compromise is preferred.
- The Commission may refuse to approve any proposed change of place name that it considers to be contrary to the public interest or based on personal or promotional reasons.
- The enrichment that an added name represents for the official toponymic nomenclature and the loss to the toponymic heritage that the replacement of the old name represents are taken into consideration.

The full version of this new policy is presented in the appendix. The policy includes the principles on which it is based, including the relevant Conference resolutions, further details on the framework for its application, and the grounds for approving or refusing a name change.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (a) Take note of the efforts made to maintain the stability of the official nomenclature;
- (b) Discuss and report on similar work undertaken in other countries;
- (c) Encourage national authorities to adopt a policy to deal with name changes.

APPENDIX

Politique relative aux changements de noms de lieux ("Policy on changes of place names")

- The Commission de toponymie bases its decisions regarding the allocation and change of place names on [choice criteria](#) that it has developed based on the recommendations of the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.
- Respect for common usage is one of the fundamental criteria in toponymy. Priority should be given to place names with the most well-established usage if they do not deviate from the other criteria.
- One of the main selection criteria applied by the Commission is to avoid choices that are likely to provoke or fuel dissent. The Commission does not wish to encourage controversy in its decisions and opinions. The Commission's priority is to seek a broad consensus and the best possible compromise.
- In general, the Commission favours the stability of the official toponymic nomenclature, particularly to ensure the maintenance and reliability of geographical reference points.
- The Commission may refuse to approve any proposed change of place name that it considers to be contrary to the public interest. Furthermore, it is reluctant to allow name change requests that are based on personal or promotional reasons.
- When analyzing a proposed name change, the Commission de toponymie evaluates the potential contribution of the new name to the official toponymic nomenclature and, conversely, the potential loss to the toponymic heritage of replacing the old name.
- Each request for a change of place name is a unique case. Thus, the Commission does not in any way consider that the approval of a change of place name constitutes a precedent for similar subsequent applications.

Fundamental principles

The Commission de toponymie is responsible for officializing place names, including those for which there is another body with jurisdiction to choose them, such as the names of roads, buildings or municipal public parks.

The Commission is also qualified to withdraw the official status of names when it deems it appropriate.

A place name remains official, with the effects that apply to it under section 128 of the Charter of the French Language, as long as the Commission has not decided to remove its official status.

When a request for a change of official name affects a name over which the Commission has concurrent jurisdiction, it deals with the request in conjunction with the body responsible for choosing the name. It may also receive and process information from citizens or groups affected by the change, or seek or solicit any information relevant to assessing the situation.

However, the Commission remains the only body competent to approve the change of an official place name.

Place names established by usage, on the ground or in maps, are effective landmarks. Officializing these names protects them from being misused or changed without notice, thus ensuring the maintenance and reliability of these geographical markers.

Moreover, place names established by usage often support and reflect a community's sense of belonging to its neighbourhood, municipality or region. These names are therefore part of the intangible cultural heritage of the territory at all levels.

The United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names have, over the years, adopted various resolutions in favour of the stability of official toponymy. Resolutions III/16 (Athens, 1977), which addresses national standardization, VIII/2 (Berlin, 2002), which recommends against naming places after living persons, X/3 (New York, 2012), which provides criteria for establishing and assessing the heritage character of place names, and X/4 (New York, 2012), which discourages the commercialization of geographical names, all refer to this issue.

In particular, the 6th Conference (New York, 1992) recognized that the deliberate change of geographical names was a sensitive act that could result in the loss of cultural and historical heritage. Resolution VI/9 of that Conference advised against the unnecessary change of geographical names established by the national toponymic authority.

For all these reasons, the Commission supports the stability of the official toponymy.

Application framework

The applicant for a change of official place name must give reasons for the request, in order to explain the merits of the request to the Commission. The Commission may refuse to consider an application for a change of official name if the application is not suitably motivated.

Amongst other criteria, the Commission uses the place names choice criteria to consider applications for name changes.

One of these criteria states that choices that are likely to provoke or fuel dissent should be avoided. Consequently, for any name change project, the search for a broad consensus and the best possible compromise, which may be the status quo, should be favoured. This is particularly true when the name is that of a place of significant importance, is well established in usage or does not pose a problem. A place of significant importance is a place where the physical size, degree of use or influence of the name exceeds the local or municipal scope.

Each request for a change of place name is a unique case. Historical, cultural, geographical and linguistic research is required before any change can be made. Thus, the Commission does not in any way consider that the approval of a change of place name constitutes a precedent for similar subsequent applications.

Reasons for refusing an application to change an official name

The Commission may refuse to change an official place name if it considers that:

- the name has significant value for a number of reasons:
 - because it is established by usage and is an important landmark;
 - because it is of cultural, historical or linguistic interest;
 - because it is a commemorative designation;
 - because it has heritage value, for example, because of its age or uniqueness;
- the replacement name presents linguistic problems (spelling, grammar, terminology, etc.), including the loss of Québec's French character, or deviates from one or more of the toponymic standards in effect;
- the proposed change is likely to provoke or fuel dissension or controversy or is contrary to the public interest;
- the request for a name change is based on insufficient, frivolous, offensive, personal or promotional reasons;

or for any other reason that the Commission considers valid.

Reasons for granting an application to change an official name

There may be cases where the official name may not be in the best interest of the public. In these circumstances, the Commission may make a change to the name of an official place, or grant a request for a change, if it finds that:

- the official name presents problems related to spelling, a toponymic writing rule, terminology, choice of language for the generic or specific, or any other linguistic problem;
- the official name deviates from a toponymic norm, especially if it is the name of a living person or if it has acquired a pejorative connotation over time;
- the official name presents a public safety problem due to its length, homonymy, inconsistency with its geographical surroundings or with other names, or any other element that could compromise recognition;
- the change is desirable in order to conform to local usage;
- the change does not significantly alter the toponymic heritage of Québec, and even enriches the official toponymy;

or for any other reason that the Commission considers valid.

Mitigation measure

To mitigate the negative effects of a name change to an official place, the specific name that has been replaced can be maintained in the official toponymy by reassigning it to another, ideally unnamed, place. However, the place chosen to reuse a name must be different in nature from the place that previously bore that name in order to avoid confusion and location problems.

If the Commission deems that a name to be changed is of great value, it may make the reuse of that name a condition of its approval of the change in question.

Commission de toponymie
March 3, 2022