

# Department of Natural Resources

ALASKA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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## **ALASKA'S GEOGRAPHIC NAMES**

### **a program of the**

## **ALASKA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

The Alaska Historical Commission serves as the geographic names board for the State of Alaska (AS 41.35.350). The citizen board, chaired by the Lt. Governor, reviews names proposed for lakes, streams, mountains, and other physical features in the state. The commission coordinates its program with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. The commission has established a process to consider proposals, as has the federal board. It takes at least a year to name a geographic feature.

In 1982 the State of Alaska enacted a law urging the state geographic names board to consider Alaska Native place names for geographic features in the state that have not previously been named, using Native language writing systems accepted by the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names has a policy to identify a single official name and spelling for each geographic feature. One or more **variant** names can be identified if needed for clarity or reference. A variant is any current or historic name or spelling for a geographic feature other than the official name. It might appear on maps in parentheses following the official name.

To propose an official name for a geographic feature, an application is made to the Alaska Historical Commission. The form is available at: [http://www.dnr.alaska.gov/Assets/uploads/DNRPublic/parks/oha/designations/AKgeographicname\\_app.pdf](http://www.dnr.alaska.gov/Assets/uploads/DNRPublic/parks/oha/designations/AKgeographicname_app.pdf) or from the Office of History & Archaeology, 550 West 7<sup>th</sup> Ave., Suite 1310, Anchorage, AK 99501, 907.269.8721. The complete application and supporting material should be mailed, delivered to the office, or sent by email to [dnr.oha@alaska.gov](mailto:dnr.oha@alaska.gov).

All proposals must be accompanied by a **map** showing U.S. Geological Survey information and identifying clearly the feature to be named. Additional maps are encouraged that show the immediate area around the feature to be named, or show the feature in relation to major geographic features, communities, and roads as appropriate. Photographs and other identifying aids are useful but are not required.

**Evidence of local support** is encouraged. These might be letters, petitions, newspaper articles, and letters to the editor, showing public awareness and endorsement of the proposed name. The proposer must establish that property owners of the feature or close to it have been made aware of the name proposal and given a chance to comment.

## GUIDELINES

In the review of a proposed name, the Alaska Historical Commission uses the following guidelines and the policies of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (*Principles, Policies, and Procedures for Domestic Geographic Names*, <http://geonames.usgs.gov/domestic/policies.htm>). A proposal must identify the type of proposed name from the categories below, address the special conditions, and establish why the feature needs an official name.

### Local usage

Active local use is the single, best reason to name a geographic feature. Local usage refers to a name for a geographic feature that has evolved over a period of years, is called that name by the community or area as a whole, and is supported by local petitions, oral histories, documents, or other publications. A feature named by the applicant is not considered local usage, even when the applicant has called the feature by that name for a number of years.

The Alaska Historical Commission encourages the proposer to:

- include evidence of common verbal or written usage of the proposed name, such as petitions signed by local residents, resolutions, or letters of support for the proposed name from local government entities and community groups

### Descriptive names (includes features named by applicant)

The Alaska Historical Commission asks the proposer to establish that:

- the name is relevant and descriptive of the feature
- the name is not in use elsewhere in the region (unless for a related feature)
- the name is in good taste and not frivolous
- the name has been used for a minimum of five years and evidence is provided of the use
- the property owners of the feature and those living adjacent to it have been notified of the proposed name and given a chance to comment on it

### Alaska Native names

The Alaska Historical Commission asks the proposer to establish that:

- the name is or was in common local use and that use is documented
- the name is linguistically appropriate to the area in which it is to be applied
- the land owner has been notified of the proposed name and given a chance to comment on it
- there has been consultation on the spelling and use of diacritical marks (special marks not normally used in the English alphabet) with all Native groups in the area and with the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks

### **Commemorative names** *(please read the special section)*

The Alaska Historical Commission asks the proposer to establish that:

- . the individual has been deceased for five (5) years and evidence of this (such as an obituary and biography) is provided
- . the individual made a significant, acknowledged contribution over time to the community or state
- . the individual had a direct association with the feature for a period of years
- . there is local support by residents and local authorities as evidenced by including letters, petitions, and resolutions

### **Historical names**

The Alaska Historical Commission asks the proposer to establish that:

- . the proposed name was in common local use and that use is documented
- . the name is clearly associated with the area

### **Name changes**

The Alaska Historical Commission is reluctant to change existing names, but will consider doing so if the proposer demonstrates a compelling reason and if there is local support for the change. It has been shown that changing long-standing names can cause confusion and unforeseen costs.

The Alaska Historical Commission asks the proposer to establish, as appropriate, that:

- . the current official name is derogatory to a racial, ethnic, gender, or religious group
- . the current official name is duplicative and causing confusion
- . the current official name is not spelled correctly
- . there is extensive local support by local authorities and residents for the name proposed and the name change as evidenced by letters, local petitions, and resolutions from local government entities and organizations
- . the property owners of the feature and adjacent to it have been notified of the proposed name and given a chance to comment

### **Names in wilderness areas** (including wilderness study areas)

The Alaska Historical Commission does not approve names for natural features in federally designated wilderness areas or study areas unless the proposer demonstrates that an exception is warranted.

The Alaska Historical Commission asks the proposer to establish that:

- there is an overriding need to name the feature (such as for purposes of safety, education, or area administration)

the land manager has been consulted and provided the opportunity to comment on the proposed name

### **Associative names**

The Alaska Historical Commission accepts, in fact encourages, using the same name for features related to each other, such as forks of a river or a creek that comes from a glacier.

The Alaska Historical Commission asks to proposer to establish:

- the relationship between the two features using maps
- the property owners of the features and those adjacent to them have been notified of the proposed name and given a chance to comment
- the provisions for descriptive, commemorative, Alaska Native, wilderness and other categories are addressed as well

## **COMMEMORATIVE NAMES**

A commemorative name of a geographic feature is to honor and recognize an individual who has made an outstanding or noteworthy contribution to an area or the state, or is a national or international figure. A commemorative name might be for an event. A commemorative place name is not intended to memorialize a family member, friend, pet or animal.

Proposals containing a given name (first or last) or nickname of an individual are considered commemorative. The full name of a person as part of a geographic name normally is not approved unless surname use alone would be ambiguous.

The person must have been deceased *for at least five (5) years* before the Alaska Historical Commission will consider a commemorative name proposal. An obituary or biography of the individual must be part of the proposal. The information should establish the individual's *direct association* with the feature, and that the individual made a *significant contribution* to the area in which the feature is located.

*Direct association.* To commemorate an event, it should have occurred at or near the feature or have had an impact on the region or state. To commemorate a person, the individual should have been physically present at or near the feature for a number of years, or engaged in some activity that affected the feature. A person's death on or at a feature, such as a mountaineering accident or plane crash, or the ownership of land adjacent to or of the feature, and recreational use or visits to a feature do not normally meet this criterion.

*Significance.* The proposer must establish why the event or individual is particularly worthy of recognition. The importance of an event can be in the social, political, economic, scientific, or cultural areas. The contribution of an individual must be notable, of consequence, and have had an impact on the community,

region or state. A significant contribution is an extraordinary effort, achievement, or impact. It may come from the individual's work, professional or civic activities, and can be in the social, political, economic, scientific, or cultural areas. The contribution should have benefitted Alaskans beyond the individual's immediate circle of family and friends. Generally, these individuals will have been recognized through a letter of thanks from the Governor or Legislature, certificates of appreciation from an agency or group, awards, newspaper articles featuring the contribution made, dedication of local man-made features (park, street, garden, building), and the like. The individual might be a historical figure.

Features in Alaska can be named for events of significance nationally or internationally. Features also can be named for persons who made a significant contribution nationally or internationally, especially if the contribution was exceptional and unique. In such instances, the requirement of direct association does not need to be met, but the other requirements for commemorative names must be met.

Commemorative name proposals must demonstrate local residents have been advised of the proposal. Proposals should include evidence of local support by local authorities and residents attesting to the individual's association with the feature and significant contribution locally, to the state or nation, or internationally.

## **GEOGRAPHIC NAMING PROCESS**

Upon receipt, a name proposal is reviewed for completeness. If necessary, the applicant is asked for additional information. Of particular concern is that adjacent land owners have been advised of the proposed name and had a chance to comment on it.

A Domestic Geographic Name Report (a U.S. Board on Geographic Names form) is prepared and sent with a map and supporting information to relevant Native groups, public land managers, local governments, and other interested parties and local media for comment on the proposed name. For proposed Native names, the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks is consulted. Interested parties might include local civic groups, historical organizations, pilot associations, and outdoor groups.

The Alaska Historical Commission members receive the report, map, and all public input before discussing and acting to approve or not approve a proposed name. The nine-member commission meets at least two times a year. Commission members reference these guidelines in their formal action. The applicant is notified of the meeting at which the commission will consider their proposed name and provided with copies of comments received from reviewers. Every meeting has a public comment period when an applicant and others interested in the proposed name can address commission members. Place names approved by the Alaska Historical Commission are official for the State of Alaska.

Following the meeting, applicants are notified in writing of the Alaska Historical Commission's action on their proposal. Unless tabled, the Domestic Geographic Name Report, all comments received, and record of the commission's action are sent to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Staff there also have a review process before the board considers and votes on a proposed name. The USBGN is the final word on choice, spelling, and official use of the place names in the U.S. Its approval makes a name official nationally. The name is entered in the Geographic Name Information System (GNIS), <http://geonames.usgs.gov/domestic/>. When a

federal map is revised and updated an effort is made to add the name, but approval does not guarantee a name will appear on USGS and other federal maps.

The Alaska Office of History & Archaeology has a program manager for geographic names who can answer questions or provide additional information.

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