

Legislative Analysis



CHANGING THE NAME OF A TOWNSHIP

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House Bill 4637 as reported from committee

Sponsor: Rep. David W. Martin

Committee: Local Government and Municipal Finance

Revised 6-3-21

Analysis available at
<http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

SUMMARY:

House Bill 4637 would amend 1846 RS 16, which provides certain powers and duties of townships, to authorize a township to change its name through a resolution adopted by 2/3 of the township board and approved by township voters.

Under the bill, a township board could change the name of the township by a resolution that is adopted by 2/3 of the members elected to and serving on the board. The resolution would have to include the new township name and could take effect only if approved by a majority of the township's voters at an election held on the next succeeding August or November regular election date that is at least 60 days after the resolution is adopted. If a majority of the voters approve the resolution, the township could change its name to that new name.

A township could not change its name more often than once every 25 years.

Proposed MCL 41.2a

BRIEF DISCUSSION:

Although Michigan law provides procedures under which a city or a village may change its name, whether in statute or under its charter authority, there is no comparable provision that applies to townships. The absence of a statutory means to change a township name came to light as some residents and officials of Flint Township have sought to change the name of theirs, primarily to differentiate the township from the neighboring city of Flint. A change to the township's name has reportedly been discussed for decades (often in conjunction with its proposed incorporation as a city), but the Flint Water Crisis, which began in 2014, brought the issue forward in a new way. That crisis began when the city of Flint's water supply source was changed from the Detroit water system to the Flint River without sufficient measures being taken to prevent lead in old pipes from leaching into the water. According to committee testimony, although Flint Township never changed its water source (also the Detroit water system), its restaurants, hotels, apartments, and other businesses suffered losses during the crisis because many believed that the water in Flint Township was "Flint water" that should be avoided.

In 2016, the township supervisor created a committee to make recommendations on the matter to the township board of trustees. In 2017, the committee recommended that the township change its name to Carman Hills. In addition to differentiating Flint Township from the city of Flint, supporters argue that the name change could enhance community spirit and help in marketing the area as a place to live and do business.

Legislation was introduced in the 2017-18 and 2019-20 legislative sessions to create a statutory mechanism under which the township could change its name. In 2020, a letter from the attorney general reportedly affirmed that a township cannot change its name without a change in the law to provide the authority and a process for doing so.

According to committee testimony, between 20% and 30% of Michigan's 1,240 townships share a name with another township. To offer just two examples, there are 11 Grant Townships, in Cheboygan, Clare, Grand Traverse, Huron, Iosco, Keweenaw, Mason, Mecosta, Newaygo, Oceana, and St. Clair Counties, and there are two Bear Lake Townships, in Kalkaska and Manistee Counties. Several Michigan townships also share a name with a county or a city.

Although the bill is understood as addressing the situation of Flint Township, it would provide a mechanism that could be used by any township for which a change of name was sought, whether to sidestep the confusion that can arise due to the repetition of names described above, to rename a place that was named for someone no longer considered worthy of that honor, to rebrand a community so that it might stand out from its neighbors, or for any other reason the officials and voters of the township found persuasive. Once a township had changed its name under the bill, it could not do so again for 25 years.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Townships that undergo a name change under the bill would incur marginal costs related to the replacement of materials bearing the former township name. Costs associated with this could include the replacement of signs, stationery, mailing or office supplies, and vehicle lettering or decals, among other various changes, and the labor and administrative time spent on updating materials bearing the former township name.

The bill would have no fiscal impact on the state or on other townships and local units of government.

POSITIONS:

A representative of the Michigan Townships Association testified in support of the bill.
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