**“*Island of Hawai‘i*” or Simply “*Hawai‘i*” ?**

In March of 2024, members on the Hawaii Board on Geographic Names expressed a desire to discuss the origins of the name of the largest island in the Hawaiian Archipelago, namely, the “Island of Hawai‘i.” Further, members wished to propose a possible reconsideration of the name given that it is the only island in the Hawaiian Archipelago whose name includes the phrase "Island of." Simply out, members wanted to know why the island wasn’t named “Hawai‘i,” in line with with the naming convention of the other islands, e.g., Maui, Oahu, etc., and wished to discuss changing it accordingly. Necessary to the naming reconsideration conversation, however, was the requirement that it first be agendized for discussion. Thus, in the April Notice of Meeting and Agenda for the HBGN, Agenda Item 5 called for a "Discussion and decision on Island of Hawaiʻi."

Subsequent to posting the Notice of Meeting and Agenda online, the Office of Planning and Sustainable Development received many emails and phone calls from the public seeking clarification regarding Agenda Item 5. Ostensibly, the crux of their concern was the lack of notice of the issue, their disquiet about what naming options were being presented, and who, and under what authority, were the people making the proposed change. Given the public’s lack of information around the circumstances that gave rise to Agenda Item 5, it is unsurprising that the public was disturbed by the news. Indeed, many members of the public expressed concern that they did not even know who or what the Hawaii Board of Geographic Names was or to what end it was acting.

At its April meeting, therefore, there were many attendees who wished to comment publicly on the issue, both in person and virtually. Realizing the confusion that was sown by posting Agenda Item 5 without further clarification, board members spent the early part of the meeting explaining the circumstances surrounding the discussion and assuaged some of the public consternation. Moreover, the Board made clear that the decision only affected the State and its political subdivisions as it is only empowered by statute to affect the name the state government used on its maps and in its documents.

Promising to provide more information about this decision and others in due course, HBGN has since been considered a number of options to increase public involvement in its decision making process. Thus, HBGN is reaching out to the public here, through this press release (?), to provide more transparency on how we got here. But first, some background on HBGN:

1. **What is HBGN?**

The Hawaiʻi State Board on Geographic Names (the “Board” or “HBGN”) was created by Act 50 of the 1974 Hawaiʻi State Legislature. The Board operates under the Principles, Policies, and Procedures established by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is a federal body created in 1890 and established in its present form by Public Law in 1947 to maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government.

1. **Who Sits on the Board?**

Under Hawaii Revised Statutes § 4E-1, the Board serves without compensation and consists of the following persons or their representatives:

* The chairperson of the Board of Land and Natural resources;
* The chairperson of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs;
* The chairperson of the Department of Hawaiian Homelands;
* The director of the Office of Planning;
* The president of the University of Hawaiʻi;
* The State Land Surveyor; and
* The director of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum.

1. **What is the Purpose of the Board?**

Pursuant to Act 50, the purpose of the Board is to assure uniformity in the use and spelling of the names of geographic features within the State because standardized spelling of geographic names allows the state and the public to communicate unambiguously about places, reducing the potential for confusion.

The Board is responsible for designating the official, or Primary, names and spellings of geographic features in Hawaiʻi and circulates said names and spellings to the appropriate state agencies. State departments are directed to use the names and spellings approved by the Board on all maps and documents prepared by or for them.

1. **Names**

In accordance with the rules of the Board and Chapter 4E of the Hawaii Revised Statutes, there is only one approved official name for a geographical feature. However, the Board recognizes that a place may have an alternate name and/or multiple variant names, all of which the Board publishes for public viewing online in the Geographic Names Information System (“GNIS”). While there may be sometimes passionate disagreements among community or cultural groups with respect to the name of a place or geographic feature, the Board makes no judgment as to whether an official name or an alternate/variant name is the more “appropriate” name.

1. **Variant and Alternate Names**

Variant names are those names that may contain a different spelling or may have different origins or meanings from the official name but are found in the historical record and are preserved for posterity. An Alternate Name is one whose use and spelling is as widely or nearly as widely accepted by members of the community as the Primary Name based on evidence submitted to and evaluated by the Board. After determining that a place or feature has a Primary Name and an Alternate Name, the Board may give preference to the Hawaiian name as the Primary name over the Non-Hawaiian name. An Alternate Name is an official name and may be used interchangeably with the Primary Name in all state maps and documents. This designation has no impact on federal agencies, which are required to use the Primary Name listed in the GNIS.

1. **Diacritical Marks**

In the late 1990s, the Board began a project to review the spelling of each Hawaiian place name shown on the United States Geological Survey (“USGS”) quadrangle maps for proper use of ‘okina and kahakō, or diacritical marks. The multi-year project involved reviewing each of the over 10,000 names that appear on the quadrangle maps and/or in the U.S. GNIS and adding the ʻokina and kahakō, as appropriate. The Board has reviewed all of the names appearing on the USGS quadrangle maps, and is reviewing additional names that appear in the GNIS. The Board has adopted a policy of adding diacritical marks only where there is solid evidence that there should be ʻokina or kahakō.  There are many instances where no decision has been rendered and the Board has advised USGS to leave the name without any diacritical marks until further research can be conducted.

1. **Spelling**

When determining the spelling of names, the Board generally followed conventions developed by ‘Ahahui ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i in 1978. *Place Names of Hawaii* (Pukui, Elbert & Mookini) was considered the primary source for determining the appropriate use of kahakō or ‘okina in individual place names. The Board has deviated from these sources when other experts, such as native Hawaiian speaking elders from a particular area, have provided alternative pronunciations. In those instances the priorities for determining names and their spellings has been as follows:

* First priority: Native Hawaiian speaking members from the community where the geographic name is located.
* Second priority: Members from the community where the geographic name is located whose command of the Hawaiian language is reliable.
* Third priority: Members who were born and raised in the community where the geographic name is located.

In 2014, the Board sought to further standardize and document decision making criteria regarding the use of ʻokina or kahakō in Hawaiian place names. The style guide was completed in January of 2015, revised in February 2016, and can be found online at:

<https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/op/gis/bgn/Guidelines_for_Hawaiian_Geographic_Names_v1.1.pdf>

1. **Name Changes**

With respect to naming new features, such as Fissure 8, now known as Ahuʻailāʻau, or recommending a name change of a feature, members of the public can fill out a name change form found online at:

<https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/op/gis/bgn/BGN%20How%20to%20Submit%20a%20Proposed%20Name.pdf>

Once submitted, the Board considers the recommendation, the reason for the change, and the evidence submitted in support of it before rendering a decision. All Board meetings are public and open to public participation.

1. **How Can You Find Out More?**

HBGN’s meeting minutes and agenda are posted online at:

<https://planning.hawaii.gov/gis/hbgn/>.

Further, HBGN can be contacted online at:

<https://planning.hawaii.gov/contact-us/>

Now that more is known about HBGN, the Board would like to hear from you, the public.