

Vermont State Building Naming Committee

March 12, 2025

REPORT

PUBLISHED
April 1, 2025

ISSUED
April 1 2025

FROM

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ABOUT THE COMMITTEE

The *State Building Naming Board Study Committee* (“The Committee”) was created by the Legislature via [Act 162 \(H.882,2024\)](#). As outlined in [Section 21](#), the Committee’s mission is to develop a proposed process for naming State buildings that are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Buildings and General Services. The Committee is comprised of eight members across various Departments and Agencies in Vermont State government.

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SECTION I: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *State Building Naming Board Study Committee* (“The Committee”) was created by the Legislature via [Act 162 \(H.882,2024\)](#). As outlined in [Section 21](#), the Committee’s mission is to develop a proposed process for naming State buildings that are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Buildings and General Services. The Committee is comprised of eight members across various Departments and Agencies in Vermont State government.

After several extensive discussions the committee was unable to reach a consensus on a unified approach and single recommendation on the creation of a new naming system. Discussions amongst Committee members underscored the inherently political nature of building naming. The complexities of this issue involve diverse perspectives and interests, making it clear that any naming process will remain politically charged. The Committee did reach consensus on a recommendation that would include an indefinite pause on naming state buildings after people.

The Committee’s included recommendations provide only a high-level framework for addressing State building naming, and do not include specific procedural details or a systematic approach for implementation. Instead, the intention of the Committee was to establish broad guidance intended to inform future policymaking. Should the General Assembly determine that it wishes to continue the practice of naming state buildings after individuals, the Committee encourages and suggests that additional study and stakeholder engagement occurs, and will be necessary, to refine these recommendations and develop clear, structured criteria for any future naming decisions.

SECTION II. MEMBERS OF THE WORKING COMMITTEE

The members of the working group as established and appointed pursuant to Act 162 are:

NAME	POSITION
Laura Trieschmann	State Historic Preservation Officer
Jessica Vintinner	Legislative Director, Agency of Commerce and Community Development
Emily Kisicki	Deputy Commissioner for Buildings and General Services
Catherine delneo	State Librarian
Xusana Davis	Executive Director, State Racial Equity Office
Rachel Dimitruk	Agency of Transportation Designee
Ted Brady	Executive Director, Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Stephen Perkins	Vermont Historical Society

SECTION III. COMMITTEE PRINCIPLES & PRIORITIES

Throughout its discussions, the Committee explored together the fundamental principles and priorities that should guide any future system for naming state buildings. While the group ultimately reached consensus on pausing the practice of naming buildings after individuals, members identified key considerations that would be essential if a formal naming system were to be established.

These included the importance of meaningful community engagement, the development of clear and objective criteria, an evaluation of the financial and administrative costs associated with forming a formal review committee, and the benefits of establishing a process for de-naming when necessary. These discussions underscored the complexity of implementing a fair and sustainable naming system, reinforcing the decision to recommend an indefinite pause.

Community Engagement and Input

If the state were to create a process for re-naming State-owned buildings in the future, whether those buildings are to be named after people or in some other way, a community engagement process would be crucial to those efforts. There are varying degrees of community engagement; oftentimes, government simply informs communities of decisions it has already made, which does not provide an opportunity for meaningful public feedback that will be reflected in the final work product. Instead, a proper system of community engagement would allow for members of the public to participate in a decision-making process beginning at its earliest stages. In projects related to infrastructure and geographic names, it is customary to seek comment at least from local residents in the immediate area surrounding the project site. However, there is value in soliciting input from relevant *geographic* and *demographic* constituencies. By conducting outreach that is more expansive than just the immediate region or neighborhood, the State can ensure that broader cultural considerations are taken into account. Of course, community engagement carries both direct and indirect costs, including expenses related to public outreach, translation services, and engagement activities. These indirect and direct costs will need to be included in base funding allocation for any future working group(s), as they will be costs the working group(s) may struggle to absorb. Perhaps worse, members of those future working groups or other interested parties who oppose community engagement efforts may use lack of funding support as a convenient excuse for not engaging the public at all. Public outreach, when done with humility and clear processes, is an essential investment in making the naming process inclusive and transparent.

Benefits of De-Naming Process

The committee further recommends the State carefully consider embarking on a process to de-name State-owned buildings that have been named after people, for the same reasons listed above. Societal values, historical perspectives, and community priorities evolve over time, and it is often the case that publicly venerated historical figures leave behind complicated legacies that continue to hurt or alienate

communities over time. For example, in recent years, Vermont communities and institutions have had to question the merits of uplifting historically celebrated eugenicist Dorothy Canfield Fisher, as the state continues to discuss and address harm perpetuated against Indigenous communities throughout Vermont's history. By de-naming buildings that had previously been named for individuals, the State can guard against similar situations and also create parity among the historical figures for whom buildings had previously been named and the historical figures for whom buildings may not ever be named going forward. In other words, a structured de-naming process allows the State to respond appropriately if a building's namesake no longer aligns with Vermont's values or if new historical context emerges that warrants reconsideration. If, however, the State chooses to continue re-naming buildings after people, another alternative that could help prevent some of these challenges would be to implement a time limit on how long a building can bear a commemorative name. This encourages the State to regularly review the continued value of a given building re-naming in a process that is fairly applied to all re-named buildings. It also allows for the current and emerging leaders of our present and future to be considered for building re-namings. This is an important matter of equity and inclusion, because building re-namings have historically tended to honor people who have held positions of immense privilege and authority, and historically, those individuals have tended to come from dominant groups that have been favored by society based on factors such as race, gender, wealth, or education. By time-limiting a building re-naming, the State can reclaim opportunities to acknowledge and celebrate the many diverse people who have positively impacted the state over time.

Financial and Admin Costs

The Committee did not seek a formal fiscal note or attempt to calculate the full costs associated with establishing a formal naming committee within an existing state agency. However, the Committee discussed and identified several factors that should be considered when evaluating the financial and administrative impacts for the recommendations in this report.

- If a board were established to *advise* the Legislature on the naming of state-owned buildings, with final decisions made by the Legislature, it would function as an advisory board and be subject to the Open Meeting Law requirements applicable to advisory public bodies.
- If a future board were granted final decision-making authority independent of the Legislature, it would be considered a “decision-making” or “nonadvisory” public body, which carries additional compliance requirements. Act 133 outlines distinctions between advisory and decision-making bodies, imposing stricter requirements on the latter. (Reference)

Expertise of members appointed on the Committee contributed that State boards require hours of staff time from the Department that supports them including. Regardless of its designation, a public body would incur administrative costs, including:

- **Staffing & Administrative Support:** Staff time would be required to schedule meetings, prepare agendas, process petitions, gather public input, maintain records, and manage the board’s website.
- **Public Engagement & Notification:** Open Meeting Law requires that meetings be publicly noticed, potentially through print, radio, and online channels. Print notices in regional newspapers for statewide awareness can be a significant cost.
- **Technology & Compliance Costs:** Board members would require official email accounts (@vermont.gov) for communications, incurring IT and records retention costs. Compliance with public records laws and potential legal review of naming petitions may also generate additional costs.
- **Research & Historical Review:** Depending on the board’s role, research into the historical significance of names under consideration could require additional expertise or external resources.
- **Operations & Member Reimbursements:** State board members are eligible for per diem reimbursement (\$50 per day) and reimbursement for travel to in-person meetings, which could include visits to buildings under consideration.
- **Other:** Legal review, research, public engagement activities.

In addition to the above, there will be costs associated with the permanent staff required at the designated agency or department responsible for administering the board. The salary and benefits for a dedicated staff position could range from \$120,000 to \$150,000 annually, depending on the level of responsibility and expertise required. If additional research, legal review, or public engagement efforts were necessary, overall costs could be higher.

Developing Clear and Objective Criteria

The Working Group agreed that any future State Building Naming system would need to carefully establish clear guidance and objective eligibility criteria in order to ensure consistency, transparency, and public trust in the naming process. Without well-defined criteria, naming decisions could become arbitrary, politicized, or subject to controversy, leading to potential public backlash or costly renaming efforts. Clear guidelines help ensure that all naming decisions align with the state’s values, historical integrity, and long-term vision for public infrastructure.

SECTION IV. OPTIONS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee explored a variety of high-level options for modifying the existing state building naming process, as well as the potential for creating an entirely new system. These discussions were guided by the desire to establish a fair and transparent framework for naming that could reflect Vermont's values while minimizing the risk of political controversy. Several options were considered, each with its own set of advantages and challenges.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee reached consensus on two final recommendations for the future of state building naming. While the discussions encompassed a range of possibilities, the Committee ultimately determined that an indefinite pause on naming buildings after individuals would provide the necessary time and space to develop a consistent and transparent approach, which may include the permanent discontinuation of the practice of naming state buildings after individuals. Below are the two recommendations that the Committee agrees should guide future actions:

1. **Status Quo Maintenance:** The Committee reached consensus on recommending that the current naming system remain in place should the practice of naming state buildings after individuals be continued. This recommendation would provide that the state legislature retains the authority to decide on state building names. This approach is consistent with the practices of several other states that have processes and procedures for state building naming decisions. Throughout its research, the Committee found no examples of states that operate without some form of legislative input or oversight when it comes to naming state buildings. Maintaining this structure ensures that naming decisions remain in the hands of elected representatives, preserving democratic oversight and maintaining the status-quo.
2. **Indefinite Pause:** The Committee also reached consensus on recommending placing a permanent pause on naming state buildings after individuals. This indefinite pause is intended to ensure that any future naming decisions are approached in a consistent, equitable, and historically reflective manner. By permanently halting the practice of naming buildings after individuals, the state can avoid the potential for political controversies and spend time exploring the possibility of creating alternative honorary opportunities in the future. Additionally, referring to buildings after named individuals can be confusing and it is preferable to utilize the building address or an easily identifiable title (e.g., “133 State Street in Montpelier” or the “Waterbury State Office Complex”) for clarity and for public safety communications. The Committee believes this permanent pause will allow the state to ensure that decisions around naming in the future reflect Vermont’s evolving values and priorities, without the need for constant revisions or the challenges of politically charged naming debates.

ADDITIONAL HIGH-LEVEL OPTIONS

The committee discussed additional options but ultimately concluded that these approaches are not consensus recommendations because we recommend the Indefinite Pause described above. The additional options are included here for background.

- 1. State Building Naming via the Creation of a Committee and Authority through a State Agency:**
The Committee explored the possibility of assigning responsibility for building naming to an appropriate state agency, through the establishment of a new committee. However, a consensus was not reached on which specific agency would house this newly created process. The Committee agreed that it would be appropriate for the Legislature to decide which agency would oversee this responsibility if this approach was taken. Should such a committee be established, it would require dedicated funding and resources to effectively manage the full application, vetting, and approval process. This would include the allocation of additional personnel, funding for public outreach, ensuring accessibility goals are met, and supporting the administrative needs of the proposed committee. The Committee emphasized that ongoing, sustained funding would be essential to support the broad scope of administrative activities required for such an initiative.
- 2. Modified Legislative Approval Process:** This option would be a revised version of the current system, in which a state agency would assist in vetting applications and processing requests, while retaining final approval from the Legislature. This hybrid model would provide the legislature with guidance and administrative support, enabling more efficient decision-making, while still preserving legislative oversight. To ensure the success of this model, it would require ongoing, sustained funding and the addition of staff for the state agency to handle the scope of work involved in both the application process and the administrative functions. There are models of this hybrid-approach in other states.

SECTION V. CONCLUSION

The recommendations and options offered in this report are intended to offer a high-level yet foundational framework for future policymaking and underscore the importance of transparency, inclusivity, and the avoidance of politically charged controversies.

However, the option and recommendation that received overwhelming support from the majority of working group members was to put a pause on state building naming altogether. Given the complexities, financial considerations, and inherently political nature of the process, many members felt that refraining from naming state buildings at this time would prevent unnecessary controversy and administrative burden. This approach allows for further reflection on the role of building names in Vermont's public infrastructure while ensuring that any future decisions are made with careful consideration and broad public support.

If the Legislature chooses to move forward in establishing a new system to name State buildings, the Committee strongly encourages additional research and stakeholder involvement to ensure that any process is equitable, reflective of Vermont's priorities, and capable of standing the test of time.

In addition to state building naming, there are other current opportunities in Vermont where naming plays a significant role, such as naming public parks, roads, and other state-owned properties. The Committee's discussions also considered these broader naming opportunities, emphasizing the need for a consistent and thoughtful approach across the state. Furthermore, it is worth noting that this is not the first time that naming processes have been examined. Several reports have been written in the past addressing similar concerns, providing valuable historical context for the Committee's work and highlighting that the challenges of naming are long-standing, political and multifaceted.