

Frequently ask questions: Wanganui proposed change to Whanganui

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Frequently Asked Questions about the Minister's Decision in December 2009

What has the Minister decided?

The Minister for Land Information has announced his decision to assign the alternative names Whanganui or Wanganui to the city. This will enable people to choose the name they prefer. The Minister has also said he expects Crown agencies to adopt the Whanganui form over time.

When will the decision come into effect?

The Board will gazette the change following a minor amendment to the New Zealand Geographic Board (Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa) Act 2008. The Act currently has the unintentional effect of requiring both alternate names to be used in official documents.

Will businesses need to change their names?

No. As is the case now, the public, including business owners and the council, will be able to choose whichever form of the name they prefer. Businesses that produce maps, for example for tourism, will be able to choose which form of the name they wish to use and there will be no need for them to change any of their maps unless they wish to do so.

Will alternative naming become commonplace in New Zealand?

Alternative names are applied very rarely and this is not expected to change.

What is the difference between alternative naming and dual naming?

Dual names such as Aoraki/Mount Cook must appear together in official documents. The purpose of alternative names is to provide a choice of name where the existing name is strongly established and to enable either name to appear in official documents – for example the alternative Mount Taranaki or Mount Egmont.

Will other Wanganui place names throughout New Zealand now be changed?

The Board has no proposals to change other 'Wanganui' names. The Board considers individual place name proposals on their merits.

Frequently asked questions relating to the NZGB decision in September 2009

When will the New Zealand Geographic Board (Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa) Act 2008 be amended so that the name change can be gazetted? * NEW

The Act was amended in December 2012.

What has the Board decided?

The Board has accepted the proposal from Te Rūnanga o Tupoho to change the name of the city of Wanganui to Whanganui. The final decision will be made by the Minister for Land Information who may confirm, modify or reject the Board's decision. The Board will also recommend to the Minister that there should be a transitional period of not less than 12 months, and that either Whanganui or Wanganui can be used during the transition period.

Why has the decision been referred to the Minister for Land Information?

Whenever there are objections to a proposal, and if the Board does not uphold all of those objections, the final decision is made by the Minister for Land Information. Even if there is just one objection which is not upheld by the Board, this requirement is triggered.

When will the Minister for Land Information make a final decision?

There is no defined time period for the Minister to consider referrals in the legislation.

Is the Minister's decision final?

Yes.

Why has a transition period been recommended?

A transition period is a reasonable measure to offer so that people and businesses can update stationery, business cards, signs, maps, and so on. This will allow for official documents to be changed at the next print run, as part of routine business or maintenance. The Board is very aware of the need to minimise compliance costs. The Board also appreciates that Wanganui is a name of long standing and it would be unreasonable to require it to be changed at short notice.

What name is to be used during the transition period?

If the Minister confirms the Board's decision, either name can be used until the date the Minister sets for the name "Whanganui" to take effect.

How did the Board arrive at its decision?

The decision to accept the Whanganui proposal was based principally on the grounds of the correct spelling and proper use of Te Reo Māori including advice from the Māori Language Commission who are the authority on correct spelling of Māori words. The Board carefully considered the approximately 900 submissions on the Whanganui proposal sent to the Board and to the Minister for Land Information. These submissions were relatively evenly split between those in support and those that opposed. The Board noted the high level of public interest expressed in all of the submissions, the views of the Wanganui District Council, the results of the 2009 referendum, and the history and long term usage of the current spelling. The Board was also informed by historical research from a number of sources, and its own policies and functions.

What does this mean for businesses? Will they need to change all their signage?

It would not affect the names of businesses, although it would affect their postal and physical addresses. If the name Whanganui becomes official following the Minister's decision, the government departments and local authorities that publish official documents (such as maps, but also including web pages) would be expected to use the official name. However, for private businesses and organisations, it would only apply to publications they produce that are intended for travellers or tourists (and for geographic and scientific publications).

Therefore businesses or community groups supporting the tourist industry would be expected to use the official name in re-published tourist brochures – but only when referring to the city itself and only from the end of any transition period. Other businesses could choose whether to adopt the official name in their business name and their publications, or whether to retain the historical spelling. Even within the tourist industry, there would be no requirement to change the names of any business or company – such as motels, guest houses, and so on.

As part of its report to the Minister for Land Information (who will make the final determination), the Board will recommend a transition period which would provide for businesses to finish stocks of stationery, business cards, signs, maps, where address information featured. The Board is very aware of the need to minimise compliance costs.

Would the decision to change the city name also mean name changes for the District and the District Council?

Not unless the Council itself wants to change its name. Under the New Zealand Geographic Board (Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa) Act 2008, the Council can apply to the Board to change its name, but the Board has no authority to change the name of the Council without the Council's agreement. However, if the name of the city is changed, that will naturally raise questions about the name of the District Council. There are councils that have jurisdiction over places with different names, for example The Hutt City Council has jurisdiction over the city of Lower Hutt. Official council documents such as maps, websites and other publications including signs will need to adopt the new spelling when referring to the city.

Will businesses or organisations be required to change the names of their organisations?

Most businesses or organisations will not have to change their name if the Board's decision and recommendation is confirmed by the Minister. Businesses could choose whether to adopt the official name in their business name and their publications, or whether to retain the current spelling of Wanganui. Even within the tourist industry, there would be no requirement to change the names of any business or company – such as motels and guest houses. However those businesses that produce publications aimed at travellers or tourists would be expected to use Whanganui.

Will sporting, recreational or other local groups with the name Wanganui need to change their name?

No.

Is the Board concerned about possible confusion between Wanganui and Whanganui – say from overseas tourists looking to fly to Wanganui?

The objective of the recommended transition period is to allow companies such as travel agencies to prepare for the change if it is confirmed by the Minister.

Does historical material need to be updated?

The decision, if confirmed by the Minister, will only apply to new/revised publications of official documents from the date the name takes effect.

How is Whanganui pronounced?

Local Māori have their own dialect in which the 'wh' sound was pronounced more like 'hw'. Therefore the name of the river was understandably heard by the settlers in the early days as 'Wanganui' (hwanganui). However this is different from the question of spelling. Many New Zealanders don't clearly pronounce the 'h' in other words like 'what' 'where', 'why', 'when' (wot, ware, wie, wen). Some English speakers may pronounce those words with the 'h' sound. Even though we may not pronounce them that way, we still spell those words correctly.

Whatever the local pronunciation however, the correct spelling for the name of the river from which the present town takes its name, is 'Whanganui'. A further consideration is that the usage of 'Wanganui' has no meaning.

How much will it cost to implement the change if it is confirmed?

The recommendation to the Minister will be for a minimum 12 month transition period before Whanganui takes effect. This is designed to minimise costs to affected businesses and organisations. For example, it is expected that new letterhead or signs could be produced as part of routine business maintenance. The Minister will also make a final determination on this aspect of the decision.

Is Government funding available to assist with the costs of changing the name?

No. The point of the recommended transition period is to enable organisations to implement the change as part of the routine updating and maintenance of stationery, websites, signage, maps, etc.

Frequently Asked Questions about the Consultation Period between May and August 2009

Why did the Board opt for public consultation when the people of Wanganui have already voted in a referendum?

The referendum was in 2006 and now there is much more documentation and information available from the research that was provided by the proposers and extra research undertaken by the Board. The Board believes the public of New Zealand, obviously including the people of Wanganui, need an opportunity to consider this matter in the light of this new information.

Is there any documentary evidence of spelling with an 'h' in the 1800s?

It has been suggested that there was no record of Wanganui being spelt with an 'h' in the nineteenth century. In fact both forms of spelling were frequently used – sometimes both in the same document – by both Māori and Pakeha. For example, in the Crown Purchase Deed from 1848 when the Crown purchased the land from Māori, W(h)anganui is spelt with and without the 'h'. And while the spelling without an 'h' was more common in newspapers, research on digital news archives has uncovered thousands of references in New Zealand newspapers in the nineteenth century where it was spelt with an 'h' – especially newspapers in other parts of New Zealand reporting news from the town of 'Whanganui'. Some examples of this spelling even appeared in the Wanganui Herald

between 1876 and 1909 – often when reprinting articles about the town from other newspapers in New Zealand. There were also official documents in the nineteenth century that used the spelling with an ‘h’. Land titles issued by the Native Land Court state that the court sat in ‘Whanganui’ and recorded titles in the District of ‘Whanganui’.

How did Wanganui get its name?

The name proposed by the New Zealand Company was Petre (pronounced Peter). The residents of the town petitioned the Governor in 1844 to change the name to that of the river, which was then spelt Wanganui. The change did not happen until 1854 when an Act was passed by the Provincial Council, but the wrong spelling was used.

Have there been other attempts to change the name?

The Wanganui Herald, on 13 August 1902, reported a council meeting in which the then Mayor of Wanganui is reported to have sought, “to have the name of our town spelt correctly – viz, by reinstating the letter ‘h’ making it ‘Whanganui’ in accordance with its original name and meaning” . The Mayor said that, “many old residents always wrote the name of our town ‘Whanganui’; in fact, quite objected to the way in which it is now spelt and pronounced”. The Wanganui Herald, on 1 September 1902, reported a later meeting at which the matter was debated. One of the councillors opposing the change noted the advantages for mail delivery of being different from other towns that had corrected the spelling of similar names. He said, “the name of the town now stood in a group of four, nearly all the other towns that were spelled without the ‘h’ having of recent years, inserted it”. The motion to not change the name was passed and thus the name remained unchanged.

Doesn’t the current name reflect local Māori pronunciation?

Local Māori have their own dialect in which the ‘wh’ sound was pronounced more like ‘hw’. Therefore the name of the river was understandably heard by the settlers in the early days as ‘Wanganui’ (hwanganui). However this is different from the question of spelling. Many New Zealanders don’t clearly pronounce the ‘h’ in other words like ‘what’ ‘where’, ‘why’, ‘when’ (wot, ware, wie, wen). Some English speakers may pronounce those words with the ‘h’ sound. Even though people may not pronounce them that way, they still spell those words correctly.

Isn’t it too late to change the name after more than 150 years?

In some rare cases, the Board does decide to accept an incorrect spelling after long term usage – and to make that incorrect spelling official. The views communicated to the Board through the submission process will help the Board and/or the Minister for Land Information decide whether the change should proceed.

Who says the spelling is incorrect?

The authority on the correct spelling of Māori words is Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Commission). They have confirmed that the correct spelling has an ‘h’ and the Board confirmed its 1991 decision to correct the name of the river by adding an ‘h’. There are also many other experts that confirm this as the correct spelling. Although ‘Wanganui’ was more commonly used (including by many Māori in the early days of the town’s settlement) the spelling ‘Whanganui’ was also used in many documents and the usage among Māori increased over time.

Did the Board consult when changing the name of the river in 1991?

Yes, there was a three-month period of consultation. The Wanganui District Council was asked for its views and advised the Board that it opposed the change. Other letters of support and opposition were received. The final decision was made by the then Minister for Survey and Land Information, Rt. Hon. Rob Storey.

Do the names of the river, the city, and the District Council have to be the same?

Legally, no. In 1991, the Board was asked only to change the name of the river. It noted at that time that it did not have the authority to change the name of the District Council. Therefore it decided to leave the name of the city as an unofficial 'recorded' name. However, the issue keeps coming up which is not surprising when the 'River City', and the river it sits beside, have different spelling.

Are there any similar examples?

No existing city names have been changed by this Board, which was first established in 1946. However it is worth noting that many 'whanga-' names were changed in the late nineteenth century, including Whangarei, which was changed from Wangarei.

Is Wanganui an official name?

No. The name of Wanganui city is not an official name at the moment. One of the matters considered by the Board at the last meeting was whether to make the current spelling official. After careful consideration, the Board decided that at this stage it would not make the incorrect spelling official. Therefore Wanganui remains as a 'recorded' name for the moment – not an official name. The status 'recorded name' means that it has been shown that way on authoritative maps.

What are the implications of not being an official name?

At present it appears on maps without an 'h' but both spelling forms are actually allowed by the Act. However, this means that any other spelling or name for the city is also allowed.

How can the name be not official if it was set by Act of the provincial government?

The New Zealand Geographic Board is aware of the change to Wanganui in 1854 by an Act of the Provincial Council, and that the name therefore had legal status at that time. The Board noted this former, provincial legislation at its meeting on Friday 27 March when it considered the proposal.

The reference by the Board to the name Wanganui not being an official geographic name is based on the legal definition of "official geographic name" in section 4 of the New Zealand Geographic Board Act 2008. This essentially states that a name is official if it has been gazetted by the current Board under the 2008 Act, the previous Board under the 1946 legislation or set by a Treaty of Waitangi Settlement Act. None of these actions have happened for the name of the city of Wanganui.

How many submissions were received on the Whanganui proposal?

When submissions closed at 5pm 17 August 2009 there were approximately 880 submissions received. Most of these were received from people using the online submission form.