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Governor Phil Murphy

# Governor Murphy Signs Legislation to Eliminate the Title of “Freeholder” from Public Office

08/21/2020

*County Governments will replace “Chosen Freeholder” with “County Commissioner”*

**TRENTON** – Governor Phil Murphy today signed legislation (S855), which requires the title of “chosen freeholder” to be changed to “county commissioner” and all “boards of chosen freeholders” to be known as “boards of county commissioners.” The bill also requires counties to update their letterheads, stationary, and other writings, as well as their websites, to bear the title of county commissioners in place of freeholders or chosen freeholders within one year of the bill’s effective date, January 1, 2021.

The bill would not require counties to update or replace signs or other writings to reflect this title change within this timeframe if doing so would require the expenditure of county funds. In these cases, the title would be changed whenever the writing is next updated or replaced in the ordinary course of business.

“We have an obligation to ensure that governance in New Jersey is inclusive and representative of the tremendous diversity of our great state,” **said Governor Murphy**. “Amid a national reckoning to reexamine vestiges rooted in structural racism, this action will eliminate the use of the term ‘Freeholder’ in county government— a title that is an outgrowth of a time when people of color and women were excluded from public office.”

“Changing the title of ‘Freeholder’ is long overdue. People know the term is offensive and refers to a time when only white male landowners could hold public office,” **said Lt. Governor Sheila Oliver, who serves as Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs**. “As a former Freeholder, I was fully aware that this title was not inclusive of African American woman such as myself. History is constantly evolving, and our terminology needs to keep up with it to be more reflective of where we are as a society.”

“Proudly, New Jersey is no longer the only state with this title,” **said Union County Freeholder Angela R. Garretson**. “Although we may be the last state to end this vile categorization of county officeholders, we are the first to pass legislation and sign it into law, with overwhelming bipartisan support from State leaders with integrity and vision. I am also happy, so many county level officials joined the movement to update and embrace the universally understood and inclusive title of county commissioner.”

“As we work to bring justice and equality to all Americans we must recognize that symbolism matters,” **said Senate President Steve Sweeney**. “The public job title of ‘freeholder’ perpetuates a legacy of bigotry that disenfranchised groups of Americans and denied them full rights and equal opportunities. We should be diligent in erasing all remnants of oppression that are unjust and divisive.”

“The term freeholder is outdated and it’s offensive to women and minorities,” **said Speaker Craig Coughlin**. “The term dates back to a time before the Revolutionary War when only white male owners of debt-free land were allowed to hold public office. New Jersey is the only state in the country that still uses the term freeholder. It is long past time that we right this wrong and change the title to commissioner.”

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"As a former freeholder, I believe it is important that the public knows the substance of what a freeholder does rather than what the term freeholder is," **said Senator Joe Pennacchio**. "Today's action was nine years in the making from when I initially proposed the abolishment of the antiquated term. The title 'county commissioner' will lend itself to transparency. This revamp will ensure more Garden State residents better understanding the function of this important position in county government."

"Today's decision to change the word freeholder to county commissioner is long awaited," **said Senator Vin Gopal**. "In Monmouth County, where we have towns like Freehold Borough, Freeholder Township and Upper Freehold - not only will changing this tile avoid confusion and increase voter participation, it will tell women and our communities of color that the State of New Jersey does not associate itself in any way with these archaic values of the past. This is a proud day in our history."

"It is beyond time we change the title of 'Freeholder,'" **said Assemblyman Andrew Zwicker**. "As a term dating back to before the Revolutionary War, whose meaning was historically intended to keep county-level office restricted to white, male, debt-free property owners it is not only outdated and archaic, but it is offensive to people of color and women. Our racist and sexist laws and conditions historically kept people from voting, owning land, and much. Removing from New Jersey's political titles this exclusionary term, while only a small and symbolic part of the work that lies ahead of us to break down the walls of systemic racism and sexism, is a step in the right direction."

"This has always been about encouraging more residents to participate in their local government for me," **said Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce**. "Most people don't know what the term freeholder means. This change will increase public awareness and update county government into the 21st century."

"Removing vestiges of racism and sexism found in names or titles that have no place in our society today is an important step among many needed to bring an end to systemic bias," **said Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson**. "'Freeholder' was never an effective title for the county public office holder. For persons of color, it was more of a reminder of the sordid and oppressive ideals of its colonial-era origins. It's time to end the confusing and hurtful conversation surrounding the term 'freeholder' and rename the position."

"New Jersey is the only state in America that still uses the outdated and offensive title 'freeholder' for its elected county officials," **said Assemblywoman Angela McKnight**. "The title dates back to pre-Revolutionary War in an era when county-level office holders had to be debt-free property owners, which, at that time included only white men. It is long overdue that we change the title to 'county commissioner' and forever eliminate the archaic and hurtful term of 'freeholder.'"

"This is not about the people who serve as Freeholders, but rather the title," **said Dr. Jonathan Holloway, President of Rutgers University**. "The title Freeholder has a legacy that grows out of denying people access and the right to have a voice. Our present day should simply not look like that."

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