

**Who is Responsible for Naming Roads in Washtenaw County?  
and  
Who is Responsible to Approving Road Names in Washtenaw County?**

The current Michigan Law, Public Act 283 of 1909, (section 224.18) as amended, states

"Immediately after laying out or taking control of a road the board shall give the road a name. The board may change the name of the road if it determines that a name change is necessary in order to conform to a general plan or avoid confusion or duplication. The name given by the board to any road under its jurisdiction, either originally or in case of a change as provided for in this section, is the official name by which the road shall be known."

County responsibility for naming roads first appears in Public Act 149 of 1893 but that Act alluded to roads that were already in existence. Who is responsible for naming a new road does not appear to have ever been addressed. It evidently has been considered the prerogative of the person or organization that builds the road, be they private or government. Currently almost all new roads are found in new housing or commercial developments, and the naming of these roads is the responsibility of the developer.<sup>1</sup> Criteria for the selection of names has become a matter of law or local ordinances but generally describes those types of names that are considered unsuitable.

The fact that the Detroit Edison Company was responsible for the naming of many of the existing rural roads in Washtenaw County was a case of a need being filled. It was necessary for Edison's purpose that all roads have a generally accepted name. That there was little objection to their naming the roads, or to the names they selected, indicates that it was recognized that this needed to be done.

So who approves the names of new roads?

The Superior Township Subdivision Ordinance, #42, approved in January 1977, states:

"Street names shall not duplicate names of any existing street in Washtenaw County, except where a new street is a continuation of an existing street. Street names that are spelled differently but sound the same shall be avoided. New street names shall be checked with the master listing of the County Road Commission. Generally no street should change direction by more than 90 degrees without a change in street names. Streets shall have names and not number or letters."

The WCRC does maintain a master road name list for the county but they don't so much approve a road name as to object to a road name that they feel is a duplication, confusing, inappropriate or otherwise unsatisfactory. This is, in fact, true for every other governmental organization that has a responsibility of approving any aspect of a proposed development. And there are quite a number.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Steven Chisek, vice-president, Biltmore Development Company

A subdivision or site condominium development plan, both of which are required to show all road names, must have the approval of:

Municipal (local) Government

County Drain Commission

County Treasurer's Office

County Road Commission

County Plat Board

State Highway Department, if the proposed development connects to a State highway.

None of these organizations are specifically charged with checking or approving road names, including the WCRC, (in spite of the Superior Township Subdivision Ordinance) but they all have the opportunity to object to a name. Private citizens and organizations also have the right and opportunity to object to a proposed road name. If there is an objection the matter will be addressed and a change or compromise reached that is, hopefully, satisfactory to all concerned.

There are other organizations that have an interest in road names as well, notably the U.S. Postal Service. While it may have not been the case in the past, they currently have no prior approval function, but will, if a problem exists with regard to road names, bring it to the attention of county officials. The problem here is that while the county is concerned with roads only in their county, the Post Office Zip area code system can extend into more than one county. This is true when the jurisdiction or the service area of other organizations extend across county lines.

At the point when the development plans receive final approval and are recorded, the road names as shown on the plans become the 'official' road names. If subsequently an existing named road is to have its name changed, for whatever reason, that becomes the responsibility of the local municipality and the Washtenaw County Road Commission, but it is still not a case of either one deciding on the name, only of approving of the name change, although local government could take the responsibility of requesting and/or submitting a name change.

As development proceeds in Washtenaw County and throughout the State, the problem of road name conflict is becoming more apparent. There are steps currently being taken to allow the State run Qualified Voter File (QVF) to act as a master list of road and street names within government jurisdiction(s), thus allowing road name conflicts to be recognized before 'official' approval occurs.