

150 rally to save Rebel mascot

Fort Smith Southside School Board also to decide on 'Dixie'

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FORT SMITH — The question of whether to do away with Fort Smith Southside High School's Rebel mascot and "Dixie" fight song has raised passions among residents since it was brought up a month ago.

The question is likely to be decided Monday.

Officials anticipate a large turnout of people for and against the mascot and fight song for the monthly Fort Smith School Board meeting, at which the board will consider discontinuing the use of "Dixie" in the 2015-16 school year and phasing out the use of the Rebel in the 2016-17 school year.

Six of the seven board members recommended, as a committee of the whole, in a June 23 special meeting



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This is the Fort Smith Southside High School mascot. It is on display around the school, and the school's fight song is "Dixie."

changing the mascot and fight song.

The board's actions last month came less than a

week after the shootings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., in which nine black people were killed during a Bible study session. A white man, Dylann Roof, has been charged in their deaths.

The attacks resulted in a nationwide outcry to do away with Confederate symbols after photographs surfaced of Roof brandishing the Confederate flag.

But School Board President Deanie Mehl said last week that the Charleston church shooting did not start the move to change the Southside mascot and fight song. There has been an undertone of opposition for years.

"This is an issue that has been brought up to me for the entire 10 years I have been on the board," she said.

Many people, in Fort Smith and elsewhere, find the high school's Rebel mascot and "Dixie" fight song offensive, she said.

A mascot should be a symbol of Southside's "phenomenal" educational tradition. But the mascot, she said, "is a symbol of segregation, oppression and prejudice."

It's time to begin a new tradition at Southside, Mehl said.

"We're not talking about tearing down the school," she said. "We're talking about changing the mascot."

About 150 people, many of them among the 22,000 alumni from the high school's 50 graduating classes, gathered at the Southside stadium in 99-degree heat Friday for a rally to save the Rebel.

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organizer Joey McCutchen, a 1981 graduate, said the purpose of the rally was to share memories and experiences of Southside and to send a message to the School Board that the mascot and "Dixie" fight song should not be changed.

Several speakers reminisced about their time in school. Many talked about about what the school and its symbols meant to them and said they hoped their children would have the experiences they had.

The mascot and fight song never had racial overtones, they said, but were symbols of tradition, history and pride.

"This is wrong, this is so wrong in many ways," 1970 Southside graduate Viola Shelby said in a voice quivering with emotion. "The memories from the school that I have don't need to be tarnished by taking this away."

McCutchen suggested at the rally that the School Board put off its vote Monday and allow the people to vote on whether to retain the current mascot and fight song.

"It's not about race," said one woman who did not identify herself. "It's not about hatred. It's about community. It's about strength. It's about tradition, and it's about excellence."

Southside Principal Wayne Haver said Friday that in his 45 years at Southside, students have never seen the mascot and fight song as anything more than anyone else's mascot or fight song. He did

not attend Friday's rally.

"I wish they wouldn't change the thing that would take out 52 years of tradition," he said.

Haver said most of the people who have contacted him have been in favor of retaining the mascot and song.

But Mehl said most of the people she has heard from favor changing them.

Those for and against keeping the Rebel and "Dixie" will have a chance to voice their opinions at Monday's meeting, which takes place at 5:30 p.m. at the School Service Center building at 3205 Jenny Lind Road.

Mehl said everyone will have up to three minutes to speak. The board will hear all comments, she said, even if it takes two or three hours. The board's meeting room holds about 250 people.

McCutchen has said the people have not been allowed to weigh in on the issue because the School Board held what he believes to be an illegal meeting June 23, when the committee of the whole voted on a recommendation to change the mascot and song.

He filed a lawsuit Thursday in Sebastian County Circuit Court against the school district and five board members, accusing them of violating the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act.

In the lawsuit, McCutchen claims that the school district never notified the public that it was going to vote on the mascot issue when the board called the June 23 special meeting. The notice for the meeting, the suit said, stated that the purpose of the meet-

ing was the annual evaluation of School Superintendent Benny Gooden.

He asked a judge to hold a hearing on his claims within seven days, to invalidate the board's June 23 vote on the mascot and to order the board not to violate the Freedom of Information Act in the future.

One of the reasons public notice of the board's actions was important, McCutchen said in the lawsuit, was that district taxpayers will be called on to pay for the mascot and song change.

Haver said Friday that it could cost \$500,000 to erase the Rebel mascot from the school.

He went through a litany of changes that would have to

be made. For starters, the end zone and midfield turf on the football field would have to be changed. The field house floor and basketball court would have to be repainted.

The Rebel and "Southern Gentlemen" also are on all athletic uniforms and equipment bags; cheerleader, Dixie Belle and band uniforms; the tunnel entrance to the football field; ticket booths; concession stands; banners in the choir room; and the 110 parking passes distributed to teachers and staff members. In addition, the Rebel symbol is welded to all 12 stations in the weight-training room.

There also could be copy-right or arrangement fees associated with adopting a new fight song, Haver said.

All those things are going to cost money that he said isn't in his budget. He said he would be sending those bills to the school district office.

Mehl said she thinks Haver overestimated the cost and said temporary fixes could keep the cost down. She said a coach suggested sewing patches over the word Rebel on football uniform pants, for example.

She admitted the highest costs would be replacing the turf on the football field and removing the symbol from the basketball court floor.

"The rest is a matter of paint," she said.

Gooden has been asked to present an estimate of the cost of removing the mascot symbol to the board Monday.