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REBEL YELLS SILENCED

BOARD VOTES TO RETIRE SHS MASCOT

By Chad Hunter

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To a round of cheers, the Fort Smith School Board voted 7-0 to retire Southside High School's Rebel mascot and "Dixie" fight song Monday night.

"I'm glad people came and had an opportunity to express themselves," School Board member Yvonne Keaton-Martin said, "and that the board made a decision that we were going to follow through with that was best for the community."

High school Principal Wayne Haver called it "an expected outcome, but probably the right outcome."

Monday night, the School Board's meeting room was filled to its maximum capacity of 200, with about 40 more attendees in an adjacent room, according to school officials. The board's vote came after two hours and a parade of passionate speakers on both sides of the Rebel mascot debate. Some saw the mascot as "harmless" while others felt it was a "hurtful reminder of our past sins."

Resident Eddie Walker told the board, "It's time to move on."

"Dixie and Johnny Reb and the Confederacy is negative symbolism for a lot of black people," he said.

"I can't speak for all black people, but it has a lot of negative symbolism to me."

A former police officer said his daughter who attends Southside is "genuinely offended" by the Rebel mascot. Some said it was about how others looking in see Fort Smith.

"We know here in our community that the vast majority of us don't have hate in our heart," Northside graduate Melissa Woodall said. "We're not a bunch of hillbillies or racists, but not everybody everywhere understands that. They see the Confederate stuff and get the wrong impression."

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Kelcey Thompson addresses the Fort Smith School Board on Monday as a crowd of 200-plus listens.

MASCOT: Rebel Supporters Get Chance To Speak Out

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Daniela Breazzeal-Dewitt, a 1991 Southside graduate, called the vote "a positive move forward."

"Those symbols divided our students then and now," she said.

An emotional Kelcey Thompson was the first to address the board.

"It is embarrassing to think people are afraid of change," she said.

After the vote, Thompson was pleased.

"It's just time," she said. "Look how it divides us. That's so sad."

Many also urged the board to keep the high school's Rebel mascot. Christian Parker, who was

president of Southside's sophomore class last year, told the board, "The issue at hand tonight is the issue of gutting a heritage."

"The Rebel mascot is used by over 180 educational institutions in the United States," he said. "Our forefathers were called rebels when they seceded from England. The mascot is the culmination of the Southern culture, not a racist icon."

Johnny Cole told the board that "eliminating our Rebel, our mascot, it's sad, really sad."

"It offends me that you are trying to change everything Southside stands for," another speaker said.

One Rebel supporter described the mascot as "simply a Confederate soldier. He's harmless."

The use of "Dixie" as the school's fight song will be banned for the upcoming 2015-16 year, while the mascot will be phased out for the 2016-17 year. Other Rebel-related monikers like the Dixie Belles drill team, Confederette girls' volleyball team and Johnny Rebs choir will also be changed, according to school district officials.

Of the associated costs, Superintendent Benny Gooden said, "We think we can do the conversion for \$200,000 or so."

In 1989, the school dis-

trict launched a community review of the high school's symbols, after which images of the Confederate battle flag were removed at the school, from uniforms to the gymnasium floor.

The fight song and Rebel, Southside's mascot since the school's doors opened in 1963, were targeted for removal by the School Board's Committee of the Whole in June in the wake of national publicity and controversy over the Confederate flag. Monday's vote by the full School Board was not treated as a Committee of the Whole recommendation in light of pending litigation.