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Attorney Questions SHS Mascot Costs

SCHOOL'S PRICE TAG TOO LOW, LAWYER ARGUES

By Chad Hunter
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An attorney suing the Fort Smith School Board over an alleged open meetings violation said Tuesday the school district is underestimating costs associated with replacing Southside High School's Rebel mascot.

Last week, the School Board voted 7-0 to phase out the Rebel mascot over the next year and immediately replace the school's



TIMES RECORD FILE PHOTO
Attorney Joey McCutchen speaks at a rally supporting Southside High School's Rebel mascot July 24.

"Dixie" fight song. At the School Board meeting, Superintendent Benny Gooden estimated the mascot conversion cost at

"\$200,000 or so." Southside principal Wayne Haver later said he thought the cost would likely "hit the \$300,000 mark."

"I think there are just some hidden things we haven't thought about," he said.

Records obtained from the school district by Fort Smith attorney Joey McCutchen place the conversion cost estimate at \$264,772. Specific cost estimates include \$38,000 from Memphis-based Athletic Surface Plus for replacing the "Rebels" on the football field end zone. A new center logo on the field is estimated at \$17,000. An estimate for refinishing the gym floor is \$18,000 plus tax.

"I've been getting tons of folks concerned about

what this is going to cost," McCutchen said. "I think it's pretty clear that this \$264,000 and change is only a preliminary estimate."

He pointed to mascot-related costs he said were not included in the \$264,772 like the football "tunnel that the Rebels run through."

"There are also different changes that are going to have to be made to concessions, scoreboards, press boxes," he said. "No costs for the installation or the labor is included within the price of that \$264,000."

SEE COSTS PAGE 3A

Times Record 8-5-15
COSTS: Lawyer Calls For 'Transparency'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

McCutchen held a news conference Tuesday to release his findings through Freedom of Information Act requests of the school district. A call to the Fort Smith School District seeking comment was not returned as of press time Tuesday.

McCutchen has filed an Arkansas FOIA lawsuit against the School Board on behalf of resident Curtis Sorrells.

The suit is centered around a June 23 meeting of the School Board's Committee of the Whole. At that meeting, a vote was cast to recommend retirement of Southside High School's Rebel mascot and "Dixie"

fight song. McCutchen contends the meeting's publicized agenda called only for a closed meeting for discussion of the superintendent's yearly performance.

"If our School Board is going to do business, then they should do it in public, and the public should be included," McCutchen said. "It's about transparency in government at this point."

Haver will oversee a committee of 20 or more tasked with identifying a new school mascot. Once assembled, the mascot committee will likely begin meeting some time in September, Haver said. A fight song committee has already chosen "Wabash

Cannonball" to replace "Dixie." Minutes from the committee's first and only meeting July 1 indicate a vote in favor of using the Texas A&M version of "Wabash Cannonball" was unanimous.

McCutchen said it's his hope that "the public is included before and not after."

"There's some process going on right now that relates to a committee that is being formed to consider the Rebel mascot," he said. "My concern is we'll have a decision made on that before the public has any input whatsoever other than tons of people on Facebook going back and forth."