

Fort Smith School Board to consider Southside mascot change Monday

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

The question may be decided Monday.

Officials anticipate a large turnout of people for and against the mascot and fight

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song change for the monthly School Board meeting, when the board will consider the issue.

Six of the seven-member board recommended as a committee during a June 23 meeting to change the mas-

cot 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

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Caroline Kutchka (from left), Celine Nardi, Victoria McCutchen and Joey McCutchen lead the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance on Friday at Southside High School during a rally about the decision to change the Fort Smith's school's mascot.

Mascot

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after photographs surfaced of Roof brandishing a Confederate flag.

But Deanie Mehl, School Board president, said last week the Charleston church shooting didn't start the move to change Southside's 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 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 school's 50 graduating classes, gathered at the Southside stadium in 99-degree heat Friday for a rally to save the Rebel.

Local attorney and rally organizer Joey McCutchen, class of 1981, said the purpose of the rally was to share memories and experiences of Southside and to send a message to the board the mascot and Dixie fight song shouldn't be changed.

Several speakers reminisced about their time in school. Many talked about what the school and its symbols meant to them and said they hoped their children would have the experience 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," said Viola Shelby, a 1970 Southside graduate. "The memories from the school that I have don't need to be tarnished by taking this away."

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

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

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



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Lucious Arter of Fort Smith voices his opinion Friday about the recent decision to change the Southside High School mascot during a rally at Fort Smith school. School District officials recommend to discontinue the using Dixie as the school's fight song in the coming school year and to phase out the use of the rebel as the mascot the following school year.

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, 3205 Jenny Lind Road.

fight song. He didn't 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, 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 will hold about 250 people.

McCutchen has said the people so far haven't 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 vot-

ed 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 the district never notified the public it was going to vote on the issue when the board called the special meeting. The notice for the meeting, the suit said, stated the purpose of the meeting was the annual evaluation of Superintendent Benny Gooden.

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

Haver said Friday 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 mid-field 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; concessions 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 copyright or arrangement fees associated with adopting a new fight song, Haver said.

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.