

# SHS Grads Rebel Against Name Change

## PETITION CIRCULATED TO KEEP HIGH SCHOOL'S REBEL NICKNAME

By Chad Hunter

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An attorney suing the Fort Smith School Board over an alleged open meetings violation said Friday he and others are starting a petition to "save the Rebels name" at Southside High School.

"The overwhelming consensus in Fort Smith is to keep the name Rebels,"



McCutchen

Fort Smith attorney Joey McCutchen said. "Our goal is to get thousands of signatures."

A July 27 vote by the Fort Smith School Board eliminated Southside High School's "Dixie" fight song and phases out the longtime Rebel mascot over the next year. The School Board's intentions were made known a month earlier in the wake of national publicity and controversy over the Confederate flag, a symbol stricken from the high school in the early 1990s.

McCutchen, a 1981 Southside graduate, surrounded himself with fellow graduates and current students Friday at his law office for a news conference.

"A rebel is someone who breaks from the norm," he said. "We had some rebels back in 1775. We call them our founding fathers. So to brand rebels as a bad name is just wrong. If they want to change the mascot, fine, change the mascot to a rebel of the 1775 brand."

## PETITION: Committee To Pick New Mascot

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McCutchen contends the School Board's July vote targeted only the mascot itself, not the name "Rebel."

"Changing the Southside High School mascot is not changing the name 'Rebels,'" he said.

According to the high school's longtime principal, Wayne Haver, a 20-plus member committee of current and former students and faculty will identify a new mascot as the Rebel is put to rest. McCutchen said the pro-Rebel petition will eventually be delivered to the mascot committee.

"We're going to be passing that petition around local folks here," he said. "They need to include graduates of Southside High School, not just a select committee."

McCutchen filed an Ar-

kansas Freedom of Information Act lawsuit in late July 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.

School district representatives have said other Rebel-related monikers like the Dixie Belles drill team, Confederate girls' volleyball team and Johnny Rebs choir will also be changed. Sorrells, whose

granddaughter is a member of the Dixie Belles squad, said he initially contacted McCutchen about filing suit.

"I decided it was going to be a waste of a lot of money if all this went down," he said Friday. "The School Board has taken it on themselves to do things that I don't think the community would vote for. That's not right."

On Tuesday, McCutchen filed a motion in Sebastian County Circuit Court for an extension of the litigation's discovery phase.

"Make no mistake about it, I'll take this case all the way to the Supreme Court on my own dime if that's what it takes to prove they violated the Freedom of Information Act and to prevent them from doing it again," he said.