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FORT SMITH SCHOOL BOARD

SHS Rebel Feud Fires Up Anew

CHANGE MASCOT, NOT NAME, RESIDENT PLEADS

By Chad Hunter

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Southside High School's discarded Rebel mascot took center stage Monday as speakers from both sides of the debate addressed the Fort Smith School Board.

Kyle Parker, CEO and president of the Arkansas Colleges of Health Education, suggested losing the mascot itself, but keeping the school's longtime "rebels" name in some form.

"Keeping the name 'rebels' will save hundreds of thousands of dollars," he said during the public comments portion of Monday's meeting. "The name 'rebels' itself is not a racist term nor is it discriminatory."

Parker cited for the School Board a long list

of past "rebels," including Spartacus, George Washington, Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Jesus.

"You were rebels," he told the board. "You went against the former board and you voted to remove a song and a mascot you determined to be racist. But please, consider and look at the name 'rebels,' and see if that really is offensive. It will save you a lot of money and my guess is a lot of litigation by some pretty hungry lawyers."

A July 27 vote by the School Board eliminated Southside's "Dixie" fight song and phases out the longtime Rebel mascot over the next year.

"I want there to be no doubt in anyone's mind the Rebel is retired at Southside," School Board

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President Deanie Mehl said Monday. "It will not be incorporated in the new mascot in any fashion."

The School Board's intentions were made known in June in the wake of national publicity and controversy over the Confederate flag, a symbol stricken from the high school in the early 1990s.

Fort Smith attorney Joey McCutchen filed an Arkansas Freedom of Information Act lawsuit in late July against the School Board on behalf of resident Curtis Sorrells. The suit is centered around the 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.

"I personally think every School Board member should resign, as well as (Superintendent Benny Gooden)," McCutchen said Monday night. "Since June 23, you, Dr. Gooden, and School Board members, you've operated in an atmosphere of deceit, deception and dishonesty."

School Board member Wyman R. "Rick" Wade Jr. questioned McCutchen's motives in addressing the board Monday night.

"You said you're here as a citizen," Wade said. "You have a pending lawsuit against this board. Are you trying your case in public?"

The last speaker, Fort Smith Public Schools athletics director Jim Rowland, read a letter from he and his wife, a former Fort Smith teacher. In the letter, Rowland noted that "as painful as it might be," making the mascot change now was the right move.

"As much as we'd like to think the mascot, song and flag used by Southside have no racial undertones, I'm afraid that many, many people think that they do," he said. "I can assure you that across our country, it's hurtful. In the long run, if this change can make Fort Smith a better place for everyone, wouldn't it be worth it?"

Also Monday, the School Board unanimously approved the district's \$153.4 million 2015-16 budget.

Gooden called the budget "unremarkable."

"We're literally winding down on a number of facility improvements, which is reflected in the budget," he said. "Other than that, it's a flat budget. That's the nicest thing you can say about it."

The budget anticipates little change from recent years with 49 percent of the district's revenue from the state, 35 percent locally and 16 percent from the federal government.

The last budget, at \$150 million, was also described as "routine."