

Southside High mascot advocate urges district leaders to resign

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FORT SMITH — An opponent of the Fort Smith School Board's decision to do away with the Southside High School Rebel mascot and "Dixie" fight song on Monday called on the school superintendent to resign and for the School Board members to consider doing the same.

Fort Smith attorney Joey McCutchen accused the School Board and Superintendent Benny Gooden of "deceit, dishonesty and deception" when members voted as a committee of the whole on June 23 to recommend elimination of the Southside High School fight song and Rebel mascot. The board ratified the vote in its regular meeting in July 27.

He said the board deceived people when it did not inform the public it was going to take up the mascot issue and mischaracterized the number of board members who voted at that meeting.

"Dr. Gooden, you betrayed the trust placed in you by the taxpayers of the Fort Smith School District," McCutchen said during Monday's meeting.

McCutchen is representing a local resident in a lawsuit in Sebastian County Circuit Court against the board, accusing it of violating the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act by failing to inform the public the committee of the whole was going to vote on the mascot issue.

School Board President Deanie Mehl rebutted McCutchen's allegations Monday. She said the committee's vote was not final and the

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meeting was open to the public. Residents had five weeks to discuss the issue and two hours to present their opinions to the board before its vote at the June 27 meeting.

"I'm proud of this board," Mehl said. "I'm proud of what we're doing for Fort Smith and I think this group is about to start a new tradition which will be wonderful for our community."

Gooden declined to comment on McCutchen's demand after the meeting.

McCutchen said it was difficult to stand before the board Monday but that he drew courage from district Director of Athletics and Student Activities Jim Rowland, whom he said he loved like a father.

But Rowland addressed the board and defended its members' actions. Rowland, who has been associated with the district for 52 years, read a letter written by him and his wife, longtime educator Norma Rowland, that said it was wrong for a school with a mostly white student enrollment in a predominantly white part of town to adopt symbols that glorified a war to abolish or preserve slavery.

Even though many white people see the Confederate symbols as innocuous, he said, most blacks see them as hurtful.

"Unfortunately, symbols matter. How can we tell

those students and friends that slavery has been over for 150 years and they should get over it while we then adopt the symbols that they associate with slavery and display them with a sense of pride?" he said.

His remarks also drew applause from the audience.

Kyle Parker, president and chief executive officer of the Arkansas College of Osteopathic Medicine in Fort Smith, asked the board members to reconsider their July 27 vote and retain the Rebel name but as a symbol of patriotism and a willingness to stand up for their beliefs.

He named several people in history who he considered rebels, among them Jesus Christ, George Washington, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Galileo and Nelson Mandela, and Robin Hood, "whether you believe in him or not."

He told the board members they were rebels for going against earlier boards and removing a song and mascot that represented racism.

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