

News

Susquehanna Twp.'s school mascot discussion devolves into fighting, with no decision

Updated: Mar. 08, 2022, 5:58 p.m. | Published: Mar. 08, 2022, 4:47 p.m.



The Indian logo at the Susquehanna Township High School field. (Mark Pynes | mpynes@pennlive.com, 2020)



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A discussion Monday night by Susquehanna Township School District's board regarding its mascot — or lack of one — yielded no resolution of the matter, and at one point devolved into an acrimonious episode in which one board member accused another of physical violence.

The board spent roughly 90 minutes Monday trying to establish a path forward on the mascot issue, after which board chair John Deitrich said, "I really don't know the way out of this yet."

Confusion over the mascot was fueled in part by acrimony that has risen to the level of board members needing to be physically separated for safety purposes.

Board member Scott Campbell was attending Monday's meeting remotely after having accused board member Jesse Rawls of punching him in a restroom during a previous board meeting. Campbell's phone line was muted by Deitrich at one point Monday night after Campbell began yelling over other participants. When he was again given the floor, Campbell launched into a tirade against Rawls, against the advice of the board's attorney, calling him a "criminal" and a "piece of trash."

Rawls told the board he wanted Campbell to go on public record with the claims, and specifically asked the district secretary to keep Campbell's words in the board minutes. Rawls said after the meeting that Campbell was "not being truthful" but did not want to elaborate further.

Following nearly two years of discussion, a previous school board voted in April 2021 to retire the Susquehanna Twp. Indian mascot, which many students and community members said they found racially offensive and embarrassing.

But the current board voted two weeks ago to reject the idea of a Susquehanna Twp. Lion, the replacement mascot selected by a committee of students and faculty.

This leaves Susquehanna Township schools in their current predicament of not having a mascot, despite much of the district's paraphernalia still displaying the Indian. Roughly a dozen Susquehanna students and alumni attended Monday's meeting to voice their objection to the board's action.

The recent vote to scrap the Lion was a de-facto vote in favor of the Indian, students said; although the board voted to retire the Indian last year, the district is not going to replace its insignia until a new mascot is accepted, meaning the current situation on the board will keep the Indian around indefinitely.

“Currently, Indians are plastered everywhere as an image of this school,” said student Paige Mullen, a fact alluded to by the Indian-crested school logos on posters directly behind board members’ heads during Monday’s meeting.

“Several of us are ashamed to graduate this year under this mascot,” Mullen said.

The vote two weeks to not give approval to the Lion was a 5-4 call. Rawls, along with board members Rebecca McCullough, Keita Kalonji Johnson and Majid Ali, voted in support of the Lion. Deitrich, Campbell, Terry Heller, Julieann Newill and Michael Cohen voted against.

None of those who voted against the Lion explicitly said they wanted to reinstate the Indian, although Heller and Campbell suggested that the mascot should have never been withdrawn.

This argument stems from a survey done at the outset of the mascot discussion that showed 58% of respondents preferring to keep the Indian, Campbell said, and he was under the impression that the survey was to be the deciding factor.

“I told everyone ahead of time I’m voting no, no matter what, because I wanted to respect the original decision,” Campbell said, adding that the previous school board had turned the mascot discussion into a “circus sideshow.”

“As much as I hate to say ‘start the process again’ ... I would be OK with that,” Campbell said, but “it’s got to be handled differently.”

“Being through the survey, the original survey, it was presented at least to me and my family and the people I know as ‘this is the litmus test,’” Heller said, although he was open to finding some “middle ground.”

Johnson objected to the idea of a “middle ground” regarding a mascot that students widely viewed as racist.

“You’re either hurtful or you’re not,” he said, questioning if his colleagues truly objected to the process, or whether the result simply didn’t fit their personal preferences.

The survey in question was distributed to students, parents and school employees and was done to gauge interest and understanding of the issue, said Susquehanna Township Superintendent Tamara Willis. It was not intended to be a deciding factor before any discussion could be had about the implications of the matter, Willis said.

“It was never designed to be the final recommendation,” she said. “The process that we went through was then to educate people.”

Campbell repeatedly interrupted Willis to suggest that the administration was putting its thumb on the scale and “manipulating” the process by holding the educational hearings, resulting in Deitrich muting the speaker phone.

“If we can’t trust the administration to shepherd these kids through a process that they can shape, why do we listen to them in the first place?” Johnson asked rhetorically, questioning why his colleagues had let the mascot process ride out for so long if they objected to its core concepts.

Both Deitrich and Cohen suggested that the mascot steering committee of students and staff could come back to the board to discuss the process; however, Willis said, the committee has presented to the board previously and received very little in the way of questions or feedback.

Speaking after the meeting, Deitrich said that, although he had voted to not support the Lion, he was not necessarily opposed to either mascot.

“I’m not set to say no to the Lions, I’m not set to say no to the Indians,” he said.

Asked what sort of information he would need to convince him that either was the appropriate choice, Deitrich was unsure.

“I don’t know precisely what it is that I would look for,” he said.

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