



AXING THE AXEMEN

*Debate roils
South Eugene High School
over mascot*

Constance Van Flandern spoke up for her daughter — the same daughter who thought, when she was 5, that South Eugene High School was a school for boys. The purple and white mascot of the Axemen is torn in a debate between tradition and progress as conversation about the school's mascot moves forward within the 4J school district.

Van Flandern sent her online petition to the school principal last month when her daughter came home despairing the divide she felt the name "Axemen" perpetuated. "The language of 'Axemen' excludes girls," Van Flandern says. "They don't hear it because it permeates the culture."

In order to incorporate feedback from a Jan. 31 town hall meeting as well as a fiscal impact statement, Dey will be presenting his recommendation to 4J Superintendent Gustavo Balderas Feb. 7 — a week later than originally planned.

Rather than glorifying the school's name or logo, Van Flandern, a former Slug Queen, says the community should "be wrapped up in the academics and performance of students."

Part of what has caused South Eugene to perform so well — the sixth-best high school in Oregon, according to *U.S. News and World Report* — is the preparation students have for college.

Carson says this discussion is priming students

uniforms in exchange for exclusive rights.

To counter his own point, Hess says that if the girls have new locker rooms but still feel excluded by their mascot, it could be all for naught.

Dey says few specific mentions of Axemen can be found on school property. A handful of banners and signs would be changed, but the largest investment would be — as Hess points out — uniforms. But new uniforms are purchased on a cycled basis, Dey says.

While Dey corrals input from students, faculty and alumni, Balderas, the 4J superintendent, and his office are assessing the policies that govern name changes.

"Last year we went through a petition from a community member to rename Roosevelt [middle school]," Balderas says. "We have policy for renaming the building and certain things but not mascots."

The goal is to either refine current policy or implement a new one so future issues are not dealt with on the fly, but according to the book.

Van Flandern took down her petition five days after posting it — having gathered 225 signatures. It was meant to create a conversation, not spark a vote, she says.

A counter petition, started by 1979 alumna Sue Jaye McVicker, is petitioning Dey to keep the Axemen name. The petition has received more than 3,400 signatures. Many of the signers who support keeping the name say the name never bothered them when they were students. They argue that the name Axemen simply uses "man" as a general term to indicate humanity, and that it helps link Eugene to its logging past.

Carson from the ACLU says she hopes that the conversation doesn't have to end up being played out in court.

"This should be a discussion about equity and not a fight about someone feeling lost because the word 'man' is being dropped," Van Flandern says. "It should be an embracing moment."

Hess echoes that sentiment, but focuses on how students are feeling. "Basically it's a good idea to have a mascot name that doesn't specify gender," he says. "I think it's essential students feel included, and if a name deters from that then I think we need to address that issue." ■

'Having a mascot at a public high school that is not gender neutral is a form of discrimination, just on its face.'

— ANN CARSON, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, ACLU OF OREGON

From a strictly legal perspective, the name Axemen is discriminatory, says Jann Carson, deputy director of the ACLU of Oregon. "Having a mascot at a public high school that is not gender neutral is a form of discrimination, just on its face," she says. "It's not an inclusive term."

Tempers over the Axemen mascot have flared in the past. In both 1988 and 1997 similar petitions were brought to the school. In both instances tradition prevailed, and students voted to not make any changes to the name.

A simple "yes" or "no" vote will not determine the mascot's fate again, says Andy Dey, principal of SEHS. Instead, groups of students, parents, alumni, staff and community members are being asked to present opinions to help Dey form a recommendation to give to the superintendent.

"We didn't have a vote because we don't believe it's appropriate to settle matters of equity or inclusion by popularity," Dey says. "I don't think we're the type of school that needs to say that more than half the students in our school need to feel disenfranchised to make a change. That's an unthinkable position for us to take, so we're not going to vote."

and the Eugene community as a whole to participate in larger topics such as the #MeToo movement. "I think it provides a good practicing place to have civil conversations with one another," she says.

However, some people think that other conversations need to happen first. "Maybe more than anything else around this issue, I feel like there are many more and much more important issues than the name of our mascot," says Jeff Hess, an English and physical education teacher and South alum.

First and foremost, Hess points to the disparity in the boys' and girls' locker rooms. Despite years of conversations and plans to bring the girls' room up to par with the boys', "There doesn't seem to be quite the same level of immediacy in enacting that plan that I and many of us would like to see," Hess says.

A rough estimation by Hess, who is also a former cross country coach, is that changing all of the Axemen uniforms would cost roughly \$200,000. 4J currently has a contract with Nike for each school to receive \$15,000 every year for varsity

For those who want to give input or hear more about the Axemen debate, an online survey is available until Wednesday, Jan. 31, at surveymonkey.com/r/southeugeneteamname (English) and surveymonkey.com/r/southeugeneteamnamespanish (Spanish). A community forum will be held 7 pm Wednesday, Jan. 31, in the South Eugene High School auditorium, 400 E. 19th Avenue.