

Crowd favors keeping Axemen name

Axemen: 'Not all traditions are a good idea,' one speaker says

The majority of speakers cite tradition during an at times heated community meeting at South Eugene

By Alisha Roemeling

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About 100 people gathered in the South Eugene High School auditorium Wednesday evening to voice their opinions about whether the school should change its longtime team name to one that's less gender-specific.

The school has been the home of the Axemen for more than 90 years.

Wednesday's heated public forum reflected divided viewpoints on the idea, but most who spoke were against changing the Axemen team name — including several female basketball players on the South Eugene High School team.

Kelsey Brown, a junior at South who plays basketball and tennis, said she was proud to be an Axemen, and asked that the district focus on more tangible inequities.

"If there's discrimination, it's against women in the school who don't get equal court time and things like that," she said. "I don't think the name is what we should be spending our time on; it's what's behind the name that we should look at."

About a dozen basketball players stood with another teammate, Madison McGowan, 17, who echoed Brown's words.

Many South Eugene alumni expressed similar views in favor of retaining the Axemen team name, with the word tradition often mentioned, along with heritage and sentimental value.

Some brought up the cost of a new team name for South Eugene High, and expressed a desire to see the district focus on "bigger, more important" issues. A few described the potential replacement of the Axemen name as heartbreaking.

Some presented long-winded responses that were cut off by the facilitator; others kept their remarks brief, such as Tim Wilson, a 1974 graduate from the school.

"I believe in tradition and history," Wilson said. "We learn from history, and there's no ad-

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South Eugene student-athletes await their turn at the microphone during a community forum Wednesday. Sue Miller Wielesck (left), 75, spoke in support of changing the name, while the students were supportive of keeping the Axemen team name.

Brian Davies/ *The Register-Guard*

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equate reason to change the Axemen.”

But others supported the name change idea.

Sue Miller Wievesck, who served on the Eugene School Board from 1986 to 1992, was the first to address the crowd. She said it’s “about time” to change the Axemen name.

“Not all traditions are a good idea,” she said “We have just been through a time where 160 young women were too afraid and too fearful to call out someone who was abusing them. What do we teach our children in the current way we’re bringing them up? Young women now here at South are a part of a subtle and very powerful system that tells you that you don’t exist if you’re not male.”

Others who argued for the change brought up the importance of language, and how they say it influences the way humans treat and interact with one another, and how women are represented within society.

Some who spoke were relatively neutral.

Victoria Robinson, who is the parent of a South student, has a child who soon will attend South. She’s also an alumnus. Robinson said she’d like history to be preserved while also recognizing the viewpoint of those who are offended by the Axemen moniker.

“I would say that we keep, at minimum, the word ax,” she said. “I see it as a symbol of being industrious. It could be the ax — or axers — and refer to men and women as axemen and axewomen and still keep the ax.

It sounds clunky now, but it could work.”

The forum reflected the prevalent attitudes that emerged after a conversation about the idea of replacing the Axemen name was mentioned in December, and the forum was scheduled.

At the time, South Eugene High School Principal Andy Dey said the school would give “serious consideration” during the school-community conversation to changing the school’s team name.

Dey’s announcement followed a formal complaint filed by parent Contance Van Flandern, who has two children in the Eugene School District. Her complaint contended that the Axemen team name was discriminatory and violated Title IX. Enacted by Congress in 1972, Title IX bans gender discrimination in education programs that receive federal money.

Van Flandern asserted that referring to the school’s teams and student body as the Axemen “promotes boys and boys teams and boys emotional well-being over the girls’ teams, athletes, events and conscious and subconscious understanding of their place in a culturally unequal hierarchy.”

Van Flandern also started the petition drive to show support for her suggestion that the district change the Axemen team name.

The petition, which was posted on [MoveOn.org](https://www.moveon.org), gathered more than 200 signatures from students, parents, teachers, coaches and members of the community, according to district officials.

A petition in favor of keeping the Axemen team name soon began circulating as well.

In January, Sue Jaye McVicker, a South Eugene graduate, started the counter petition drive, which had gathered more than 3,600 signatures as of Wednesday.

Many who signed the counter petition were from Eugene and Springfield, but some were from areas outside of the valley and state. McVicker said Wednesday that people from “all over the world” had signed the petition.

[Change.org](https://www.change.org) is a for-profit company, according to its website. [Moveon.org](https://www.moveon.org) is both a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization and a federal political action committee or PAC, according to its website.

The online survey provided by the district was available to all community members from Jan. 12 to Jan. 31 and received 3,885 responses as of Wednesday night. The survey did not count as a vote.

Dey said he plans to make a recommendation about the Axemen name to Superintendent Gustavo Balderas in early February.

School and district leadership then will consider all submitted comments and information before deciding next steps.

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