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TUESDAY | JUNE 22, 2021

Business, ad hoc group tussle over former East High site

Supes have two weeks to approve land swap between SOCSD, Wildlife Dominion Management

BY TYLER B. JONES
tjones@cdispatch.com

A group representing an ad-hoc educational group came before Oktibbeha County supervisors in force Monday in an effort to block a transaction involving the former East Oktibbeha High School property.

The Educational Association of East Oktibbeha County Schools wants to maintain control over the campus, where it has hosted a handful of alumni events since it closed in 2015 with the consolidation of coun-

ty and city schools. In citizen comments Monday, which at times veered into issues of race, group members sought to compel supervisors to stop a land swap that would give control of the old school property to Wildlife Dominion Management LLC, an electronics manufacturer from Lowndes County.

Supervisors ultimately tabled the matter until July 6, citing a need for further investigation.

"It's just a big loss that in addition to the memories and investments made out there, that

we were never acknowledged," EAEOCS President Jackie Ellis said. "We want to preserve a 55-year legacy of the school. If it's not equal and fair, it's not acceptable."

The school on Moor High Road is located on 16th Section land, meaning the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District cannot legally sell the property outright. Instead, the school board in April approved a land swap with Wildlife Dominion Management, in which the company would take control of the property in exchange for

timberland of commensurate value. Both properties are valued at \$300,000, and SOCSD can generate additional revenue from the timberland by leasing it to harvesters.

Because SOCSD already approved Taylor's bid, county supervisors must now approve the transaction, due to the property being located in the county. Then the issue would go to the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce for final approval.

The Educational Association of East Oktibbeha Coun-



Ellis



Trainer

ty Schools is not a registered nonprofit with the Secretary of State's Office and does not currently hold any lease agreement with SOCSD for use of the property, according to school officials. In the past six years, the

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16th Section

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group has used the campus only for occasional alumni events, Ellis said.

Still, Ellis said her group has attempted unsuccessfully to formally procure the property from SOCS D, and she was under the impression the school district only wanted to lease it, not sell it.

"We have been denied equal opportunity," Ellis said. "We have not been able to speak on our behalf regarding our proposal to the school district. ... We don't feel this should go through because the order in which this occurred and the way it transpired is not accurate. We request that (the supervisors) cease and desist any and all sale of transfer of title until this is resolved and investigated."

Further, Ellis told supervisors she believes the county should purchase the property with taxpayers' money and lease it to her organization.

"(The supervisors) spend the money in some other way, other than we don't need a building," Ellis said. "Well, they should give us that taxpayer money to use for the building."

'That school was built for us'

Moor High, evolved from the Pleasant Grove Community School, was built in 1960 as a segregated Black school. At its closure in 2015, it served as the grades 7-12 campus

for all public school children living in that area.

While the land swap would generate revenue for county education, some members of EAE-OCS expressed concerns that the school's history would be wiped away.

EAEOCS Public Relations Specialist Willette DuVall said the association is a hub for the community, and the property would act as a community center for its members. Even though the organization has been in existence since 2002, no educational or recreational programs have ever been created, but she said EAEOCS has a design for initiatives that is "alive" and ready for development and does not feel an "alien" from Lowndes County should take this opportunity away from them.

One EAEOCS member and former Oktibbeha County School District board member, Jossie Malone Redmond, said the school was not meant to ever be equal, but a place for Black children in Oktibbeha County to learn.

"Let me tell you a little history," Redmond said. "Mr. B.L. Moor, whose name was on East Oktibbeha School District, in the minutes said, 'If this school ever is forced to take in white students, take my name off of it.' That school was built for us."

Taylor, who attended Monday's meeting, said if his proposal is successful, he will create a space in the facility dedicated to the history of the high school to continue on its legacy.

While the board will already have voted on the proposal, EAEOCS asked a representative from the Mississippi Department of Justice to appear at the supervisors' board meeting on July 20 to mediate the dispute and see if any civil rights were violated in the process.

District 2 Supervisor Orlando Trainer said he would like to see the land utilized by both parties and believes they should come to an agreement on how to compromise the space.

Taylor said while he could potentially be open to the idea of leasing out parts of the property to EAEOCS, he does not know what potential risks could arise due to his business being a manufacturing facility.

"Our purpose of the facility and what they would like of the facility are really not the same thing," Taylor said. "We're manufacturers and deal with deliveries and shipping."

Deal expires in two weeks

District 3 Supervisor Marvell Howard said he understands both sides of the conflict and wants

to be fair to all parties involved. Because SOCS D had no representation at Monday's meeting, he said he wants to verify with the school board that all legal steps were followed by Wildlife Dominion.

"I don't want to be seen as a board member that killed a deal that would have benefitted (SOCS D) and it helping the education of children," Howard said.

Taylor said he has approximately two weeks for the board to vote on the matter until the offer of timberland goes away, forcing the supervisors to make a decision at the next board meeting.

SOCS D Board Attorney John Hill told The Dispatch if the proposal fails, the school board will look for alternatives for the property sale.

"We have a live fish on the hook, and we would like to move forward with that proposal," Hill said. "... If we don't move forward with this project, then we need to figure out something else because that property continues to sit there, that building continues to sit there. If we don't do this, we need to do something else."



Howard