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Residents will push for name change at Robert E. Lee High School at Monday Tyler ISD board meeting

By CORY MCCOY, comccoy@tylerpaper.com

Aug 17, 2017



photo by Sarah A. Miller/Tyler Morning Telegraph A new fence has been erected around the outside of Robert E. Lee High School.
SMIL

A group of Tyler residents believes now is the time for Tyler Independent School District to change the name of Robert E. Lee High School.

They plan to attend the TISD board of trustees meeting Monday to raise the issue of a possible name change. There also is a [change.org](https://www.change.org) petition to keep the name, and that site had more than 1,000 signatures of support as of 5 p.m. Thursday.

TISD Communications Director Dawn Parnell said the board sets agenda items, and the issue is not on Monday’s agenda. However, the public is welcome to speak during the public comment portion of the meeting and anyone wishing to speak should sign up at least 10 minutes before the meeting starts.

“The Tyler ISD administration and board of trustees continuously stay aware of national concerns and their impact locally,” Parnell said. “If an issue appropriately rises for board consideration, collaboration between the Tyler ISD board of trustees and various leaders throughout Tyler, Texas, will occur, with logistical assistance from Tyler ISD administration, while in accordance with the Texas Open Meetings Act, Tyler ISD policy and board operating practices.”

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Board President Fritz Hager said the school board has been focused on student outcomes and hasn’t discussed a potential name change.

“It has been our hope and prayer that Tyler ISD could maintain our focus on student achievement and not be drawn into the national debates that have often proven to be a distraction, at best, or divisive and dangerous, at worst,” Hager said in a statement Thursday. “Our board has not discussed the issue of renaming any of our schools and when, or if, we do, it will be done publicly and in accordance with Texas Open Meeting requirements.”

DG Montalvo, who is organizing the group asking for the name change, said recent violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, has given Tyler an opportunity to heal local racial divides.

“We want a commitment to changing the name now, but we can work on the timing and the process,” he said. “We want a commitment now, it’s the right time.”

Montalvo said Tyler is a Christian community and changing the name is the right thing to do.

“Every single one of our school board members are Christians and we are asking for them to speak on behalf of their faith and their city and help change the name to heal racial tensions in Tyler,” he said.

However, many believe the name should remain.

“Robert E. Lee is part of American history, which cannot be changed and there is no need to change the name of a high school,” said 1987 Robert E. Lee graduate Angela Mueller, who created the [change.org](https://www.change.org) petition to keep the name. “I believe the citizens of Tyler have other issues to focus on other than the name of a high school.

“Those that do not want the history of Lee to change need to have a voice and we want to be heard,” she said. “When (John Tyler High School) burned and had to be rebuilt in the 80s, after the fire, the school was not renamed. REL and JT High schools are a part of Tyler’s history and the names should remain.”

Both schools are in the early stages of being renovated and largely rebuilt after a \$198 million bond issue was passed by more than 80 percent of voters in May.

According to a recent survey by the Southern Poverty Law Center, at least 109 public schools are named for Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis or other Confederate leaders. Schools named after Robert E. Lee are the most prevalent, with 52 across the nation. —

At least 39 of the schools were built or dedicated between 1950 and 1970. Tyler's Lee was built in 1958.

The SPLC study shows most confederate monuments were built in two periods, from 1900 to 1920 and 1950 to 1970. The first period they attribute to a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the second coincided with the civil rights movement.

Tyler ISD only recently had a federal desegregation order lifted.

The order dated back to 1970 and it required TISD to integrate and spelled out the details of how the district would do so. Lifting the order means the school district no longer has to report to the court as it related to the order and the district has the freedom to make decisions about its future without seeking the court's permission.

The district's demographics have changed considerably since the order was put in place.

In the early 1970s, TISD served a student population that was 67 percent white and 32 percent black. Today, Tyler ISD's student population is 46 percent Hispanic, 30 percent African American and 22 percent white. Lee has a minority population of more than 60 percent.

Montalvo said the name should have been changed decades ago when Tyler ISD was desegregated.

"We are a good and godly people in Tyler, Texas, that need to get the faithfulness to Christ to extend past Sunday mornings in our racially divided churches and actually make an impact in our city throughout the week. We have failed to do that, but now is the time to change that," Montalvo said. "One way we can change it is by communicating to everybody in the city of Tyler that we are committed to overcoming racial tension and doing whatever is necessary to heal those divides no matter what the cost."

Twitter: @TMT_Cory

If you go:

What: Tyler ISD board of trustees meeting

When: 7 p.m. Monday

Where: The Davis Conference Room at the Jim Plyler Instructional Complex, 807 W. Glenwood Blvd.

Statement from Tyler ISD Board of Trustees President Fritz Hager:

The board of Tyler ISD has clearly stated that positive student outcomes are our top priority. Under the leadership of Dr. (Marty) Crawford, this approach has dropped the number of Improvement Required schools from 11 to 2, raised STAAR scores, and passed the largest bond in the history of our district. Tyler ISD strives to educate all students, regardless of race, creed or gender and condemns racism and prejudice in our schools. It has been our hope and prayer that Tyler ISD could maintain our focus on student achievement and not be drawn into the national debates that have often proven to be a distraction, at best, or divisive and dangerous, at worst. We care deeply about the safety of our students and employees and will strive to protect them and maintain our focus as our community wrestles with these issues. Our board has not discussed the issue of renaming any of our schools and when, or if, we do, it will be done publicly and in accordance with Texas Open Meeting requirements.





Renaming Tyler ISD's Robert E. Lee and John Tyler High Schools could cost hundreds of thousands more if not done during renovation

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