

SCHOOLS

Activists target Napa High Indians mascot

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J.L. Sousa, Eagle file photo

A replica of the original Napa High School Indian logo is seen in the lobby of the Napa Valley Unified School District auditorium. The original, created in 1937 by Charlie Ratto, is now on display in the school attendance office.

Native American activists, including local graduates, want Napa High School to stop using “Indians” as their mascot.

Last week, only days after Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation banning

California public schools from using the name Redskins for athletics and mascots, half a dozen Native Americans and others requested the Napa Valley Unified School District Board of Education address—and change—Napa High’s longtime school symbol.

In response, Superintendent Patrick Sweeney has promised to study the issue with the help of activists, students and other residents.

“We know there’s a lot of emotions on all sides of [the issue],” said Sweeney. “There are those who grew up in Napa and are mostly attached to the name of the mascot. And another view is we want to respect the Native Americans in this community.”

Susan Rushing-Hart of Napa, a supporter of changing the mascot, told the school board last Thursday: “It’s time to discuss the mascot at Napa High.”

“What happened to the early indigenous people of this valley was not a good thing,” Rushing-Hart said. “They were not treated with honor and respect, and I think many, many people in this nation are insulted by the use of Indians as a mascot.”

Rushing-Hart was joined by members of Sacred Sites Protection & Rights of Indigenous Tribes, a Native American organization based in Vallejo that has successfully lobbied schools in Vallejo and Crockett to dump their mascot names that were based on Native Americans.

The organization’s executive director, Maka Blu Wakpa, is an alumnus of Napa High who graduated in 1998 when he was known as Jesse Johnson.

“Seventeen years ago, I graduated as a Napa High School Indian,” he said. “However, while I attended this school a trusted teacher taught us Indians were extinct. Indian mascot imagery, pep rallies and administrative messaging only reinforced this myth.”

“Now that I have returned to my Lakota culture” and earned a Ph.D. in Native American Education, Wakpa added, “I have reclaimed my

confidence in my indigenous identity and am determined to bring an end to the legacy of colonial nostalgia in our public schools.”

Another former local student, Tria Blu Wakpa, who graduated from Vintage High School in 1999 as Megan Tria Andrews and is married to Maka Blu Wakpa , noted the “issue of decolonizing Native mascots is a nationwide conversation that is happening” now.

Tria Blu Wakpa, who is working on her Ph.D. in ethnic studies at U.C. Berkeley, said mascots like those at Napa High “dehumanize” native peoples. She urged the school board “to begin to remove the mascot.”

Still another Napa High alum, Joshua Bronk (Class of 2012), started a [petition](#) drive last week on [Change.org](#) calling on his former school to “change your mascot.”

The petition had 454 supporters as of Tuesday.

A [counter petition](#), “Keep the Napa High School Indians,” started by Madyson Almirol of Napa, had 361 supporters.

Many of those signing the counter petition posted comments in support of the Indian mascot reading:

“Class of 1987—Indian pride, world wide!”

“When does this craziness stop??? Ridiculous!!! Go Indians!!!”

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“My children are third-generation Napa Indians. This is a tradition! I’m tired of everything becoming a racial issue when it really has nothing to do with race! I have Native American in me!”

“It’s ridiculous that after all these years, we suddenly need to change this. Political correctness at its worst!”

Following the activists’ remarks, which came during the public comment period of last Thursday’s board meeting, the board’s vice president, Robb Felder, said Sweeney had decided to form a task force to discuss the issue following his meeting with the group earlier that evening.

Sweeney promised to study the issue through the task force, which will be formed in the coming weeks, he said.

He said the task force will be made up of “people with different perspectives.”

The district wants to “also get the student voices, the students who are actually in the classrooms in the high school, playing on the sports team, in the band, in the music programs, on the dance squad to allow those students to have a voice in their future and what they want to do,” according to Sweeney.

This is not the first time that the issue of changing the Napa High mascot has surfaced. It arose in 2002 while the state Legislature debated a bill calling for all California public schools, colleges and universities to do away with Native American-related mascot names.

Although that legislation failed, the success of Assembly Bill 30 last week has emboldened Sacred Sites Protection & Rights of Indigenous Tribes to push the matter in Napa after last year getting Vallejo High School to drop its Apache mascot and Solano Middle School in Vallejo to drop Chieftains, and persuading John Swett High School in Crockett to announce earlier this year it would stop using Indians for their mascot.

AB 30 only addressed the use of the name Redskins in public schools.

Redskins has also been the center of debate in the National Football League where the Washington Redskins have been fighting a public relations and legal battle to retain the name, while numerous Native American groups have urged the franchise to remove what they consider

a racial slur.