

Baseball Voted Down By Auburn Board of Education; Concerns From Patrons on Various Issues

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Monday, June 11, the Auburn Public Schools Board of Education voted 4-1 against adding baseball as an extracurricular activity beginning in the 2012-2013 school year.

Beth Kernes-Krause was the only board member who voted in favor. Barb Billesbach, Bob Hemmingsen, Stephen Kennedy and JaNay Oestmann voted against. Board member Dr. Michael Zaruba was absent from the meeting.

Board members said that they had heard from Auburn Public Schools district patrons. The board members said that patrons who contacted them were concerned about changes in land valuations and that the addition of baseball would affect participation in other sports.

During the general comments portion of the meeting, Troy Wynn asked the board to reconsider adding high school baseball.

Wynn thanked the school board for considering the issue again. He said that he understood why the board voted down baseball in March 2011. At that time, the school board members cited budgeting and financial issues as the major factors in their decision.

While Wynn said that he did not want to pressure the board into a decision, he said that high school baseball was a great opportunity for students.

About 50 persons attended the meeting at the Auburn Public Schools' administrative offices. Many who attended wore baseball jerseys and caps. Wynn said that he noted that high school age students attended the June 11 meeting, which showed that there was enough interest to support high school baseball. When the audience was asked if they supported adding high school baseball, most raised their hands in support and none were against.

No other audience member addressed the board during general comments.

All the school board members spoke about the issue when it came up on the agenda.

Kennedy said that during the winter, he had a more positive feeling about baseball. However, he said that during the last few weeks that he had received more communications against baseball. Kennedy, who is involved with agriculture, said some of the communications he received regarded increases in property assessments. Many constituents were worried about increases in land valuations if income remained flat. Kennedy also said that he received concerns from parents about baseball affecting participation in current Auburn Bulldog sports. He said that it was important to consider that the property tax is an unfair way to support a school system. Kennedy said that many people he worked with pay more than \$100,000 in property taxes.

Another concern he expressed was that a lot of infrastructure on the senior high school buildings and grounds have not been improved since the senior high building opened in the early 1970s. Kennedy said that he was unsure where funding will be in the future. It was hard to look far ahead, he said.

Oestmann said that she was not against student activities but had concerns about how the addition of baseball would affect other activities.

Property valuations were another concern, she said. With agricultural land valuation increasing 22-25 percent, many landowners bear the burden of paying for schools, Oestmann said. Even if the levy decreased 5.4 percent, local landowners would still have a 17-18 percent increase next year, she said.

"We need to respect the rural residents' money. I love sports. I would do anything to support opportunities to allow students to perfect their skills and pursue their passions," Oestmann said. She also said that she received calls from rural landowners with concerns about how the

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addition of baseball would affect other sports. Oestmann said that she was concerned about the level of participation in activities if participation was spread out thinner.

"It drags down the spirit of the school if we can't compete," she said.

Kernes-Krause said that financing was her major concern. She said that she appreciated the effort that went towards plans for the program and subsidizing by boosters. Kernes-Krause said that she fully respected everyone's opinions. She said that she had received few comments. Kernes-Krause said that more comments she received were neutral but that she wanted all aspects of the issue to be considered.

Billesbach said that she had received a few telephone calls on the issue, including voice mail.

Billesbach said that Kennedy and Oestmann hit on all the points she had on the issue. While Billesbach said that she loved baseball and softball, she was concerned about finances.

"Almost everyone here wants us to add baseball. You're not the only people we're hearing from. We've heard both sides of the issue," Hemmingsen said.

He said that he appreciated the baseball supporters' attendance at the school board meeting.

After the vote, Hemmingsen thanked everyone who attended the meeting and everyone for their time on the issue.