

ENOUGH OF THE EIGHT – What’s best for kids? Residents’ concerns fall on deaf ears as school board asks neighboring property owners to ‘agree to disagree’ about plans for Brownsboro school

By Tony Cotten
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A town hall meeting April 14 at North Oldham High School attracted 25 residents interested in a discussion with members of the Oldham County Board of Education.

The school board hosted the meeting, and six members of the audience signed in to address the board. Many residents arrived with questions about plans for an elementary school in Brownsboro, and hoped to hear an update on eight recommendations issued to the school board by Oldham Planning and Development in January.

But residents left in disbelief with their questions unanswered as the school board proclaimed that they won't proceed with the recommendations.

Board chair Joyce Fletcher opened the meeting by welcoming attendees and setting ground rules for the meeting – five minutes per speakers and no public criticism of school board employees. Concerns about individual staff members are to be addressed to staff members or his or her superior, Fletcher said.

A podium stood to the left of a set of tables arranged in a U-shape for board members to face the crowd. At first the speakers were pleasant in their opening dialogue.

Past the questions about a school soccer field that sounds like it resembles an 18th century kickball field, and concerns about plans to address the rising cost of fuel for buses, a tsunami of frustration swept through the meeting as the topic turned to Brownsboro and plans for a new elementary school.

The topic-driven wave carried with it much of the same questions, facts, and assumptions made months prior at other board meetings and even some Oldham County Fiscal Court meetings.

Speakers focused on eight recommendations given to the school board in January.

Brownsboro resident Donald Hall was the first to ask what the board had done to respond to these recommendations, specifically the recommendation that officials report to fiscal court with justification for selecting the Brownsboro site, and offering student population projections and a list of sites overlooked by the school board.

Hall also inquired about the recommendation for a meeting between adjoining property owners and Superintendent Paul Upchurch.

After several minutes of discussion, resident Gary Keibler and Upchurch reminded Hall that the meeting took place, and he was invited but did not attend.

Hall's question about school board reporting to fiscal court went unanswered. More questions surfaced when Keibler approached the lectern.

Keibler asked why a list of six items he previously asked the board and Upchurch to address went unanswered.

Keibler seemed flabbergasted by Upchurch's response that a written response would not be coming as all the items on Keibler's list were discussed at a previous meeting.

As Keibler continued to question the school board about the six items he had requested, the conversation circled back to the eight recommendations from Oldham Planning and Development.

And once again, little discussion surrounded recommendations and board members questioned Keibler about the motive behind his questions.

"I have the same comment as Mr. Hall," Keibler said "that is when, not if, when can we expect a response to all eight items – in particular the seventh item which to me should be the first, because that's the justification?" "I am not sure you can expect that to happen because we have justified ourselves and are moving forward with the campus." Fletcher said.

Keibler referred again to an answer for all eight recommendations. And again he received a response that board members simply don't see the necessity to answer the eight recommendations.

"They were recommendations by planning and zoning, not directives. And we considered the recommendations very seriously." Fletcher told Keibler.

As Keibler worked to wrap up his comments it became clear that board members grew tired of the twists and turns that ultimately landed on the same questions about the eight recommendations.

With time running long, Fletcher suggested that the school board and Keibler simply "agree to disagree" and move on.

Keibler refused to accept, but made a compromise that guaranteed Keibler a return to the podium at the end of the meeting.

The next speaker approached the podium only to relinquish his turn as his questions also related to the eight recommendations.

As he sat down Anne Coorsen, general counsel for Oldham County Schools, offered answers to the audience regarding the different recommendations.

And while she did not go from one to eight on the list she took the time to outline that some of the recommendations simply did not include the input of school board members as they are base-level decisions such as landscaping choices or the workings of future facilities management as it relates to parks, fields or the usage of facilities yet to be built.

She also pointed out that Oldham County Schools would be implementing items such as architectural design into the Brownsboro plan that will exceed the recommendations given by planning and zoning as well as exceed standards set by the state.

As she worked through several minor points relating to the list of eight, she came upon recommendation seven – that Oldham County Schools report to Oldham fiscal court.

Coorsen strongly advised against it.

"They do not govern us. They have no jurisdiction over the board of education, they don't have the information needed to justify where a school campus goes. That is exclusively the job of the board of education," Coorsen said.

She said town hall meetings are intended to create dialogue between the school board and residents, but in the end, the decisions made, are strictly at the discretion of school board members.

If constituents are unhappy with the decisions of the school board, Coorsen suggested they elect new school board members.

As the meeting continued, Magistrate J.D Sparks approached the podium and said the board is good at "lawyering up."

He emotionally recanted many occasions he's witnessed residents' unsuccessful attempts to communicate with the school board regarding the Brownsboro project.

Sparks commented on what he felt was disrespectful behavior; case in point was Keibler's request for a written response to which he was flatly denied.

In his summary, Sparks asked the board if there was anything that anyone could have said to change their minds about building an elementary school in Brownsboro.

First, Upchurch addressed Keibler's request and he said he never promised Keibler that he would respond. Upchurch said the board has spent years looking for a school site in the Brownsboro area, and board members must make decisions based on what is right for students – a standard that doesn't always please everyone.

The clock continued to tick, the words continued to flow, and in the end, plans for a Brownsboro school will proceed with or without recommendations or the blessing of others.

Next week, The Oldham Era looks deeper into the aspect of the Brownsboro school project. E-mail us about this story at: publisher@oldhamera.com.