

The Herald

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Thursday, January 8, 2004

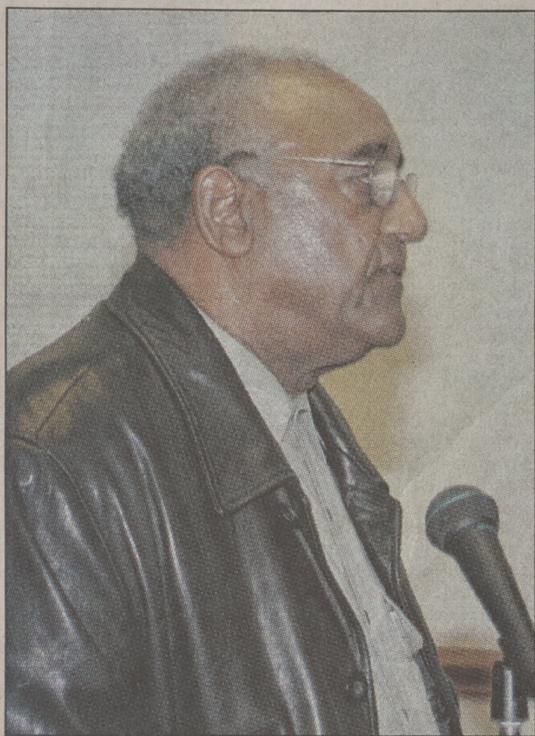
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Merger decision due

KM School Board to reconvene Thursday at 6 o'clock



GARY STEWART / HERALD

Former City Councilman Phil Hager addresses the Kings Mountain Board of Education at Monday's meeting at Central School. The meeting reconvenes tonight at 6 o'clock.

By GARY STEWART
 Editor of The Herald

As the clock winds down to a decision by the U.S. Justice Department on the proposed Cleveland County Schools merger plan, the Kings Mountain Board of Education is apparently undecided whether it would appeal to federal district court if the DOJ preclears the merger.

Meeting in what many believed would be the final time Monday night at Central School, the board, instead of adjourning its meeting, recessed to reconvene Thursday at 6 p.m.

The DOJ is scheduled to issue its ruling by Monday, January 12 but there is speculation that the decision will come on Friday.

During the board meeting, comments from Supt. Larry Allen and chairwoman Shearra Miller indicated that the board may be willing to accept the DOJ's decision regardless of what it is.

Allen told the board and the audience that "no one has officially heard anything" and that the School Board's attorneys "haven't gotten any indication what the decision might be."

"We're waiting and anticipating hearing something by Friday," Allen said. "Whatever that decision is I suppose we will have to live with it."

Miller said, "It doesn't feel like this is our last meeting. I hope the Department of Justice will make the right decision." But in a reply to a com-

ment by Kevin Smith, who noted that "this is possibly your last meeting," Miller said, "it could be."

No other members of the board spoke about the matter in open session.

Supt. Allen said Tuesday that the board's merger attorneys Brian Shaw and Richard Schwartz had indicated that they could file suit against the Justice Department, "but the likelihood of that succeeding is very slim."

Allen said the board has not addressed that possibility, but probably will Thursday night.

Allen said Shaw spoke to the Justice Department Tuesday but did not get an indication as to what decision had been reached, if any.

"They told him they could ask for more information, or they could render a positive or a negative decision," Allen said.

If the merger plan is approved, it would take effect 24 hours after official notification to the Cleveland County Board of Commissioners and the Kings Mountain and Shelby systems would cease to exist. All three current school boards would also cease to exist unless they are used in an advisory capacity. The merger called for an interim school board, which would probably assume legal responsibilities; however, some legal questions may have to be resolved by either the courts or the State School Board because the terms of all of the appointed board members have already expired.

Contacted by phone Tuesday morn-

ing, board member Mike Smith, who lives in the area of Gaston County that KMDS claims its residents would have their voting rights violated by merger, said he is still in favor of fighting merger until the end.

"I can't speak for the board, but I would be in favor of pushing it," he said. "If the county is going to assume our assets they can assume our liabilities. They're the ones that started this. I feel like we should fight it until we can't fight it any more."

Vice-chair Stella Putnam, who throughout the merger battle has indicated she would fight it until the end, said she is getting many calls from people that "do not want us to stop until we have exhausted every avenue we have."

However, Putnam said, if the DOJ rules against Kings Mountain she would have to examine the situation and decide "if we have done everything we can do. You're talking the federal government. I still don't merger is right. I don't think it's ever been about children. I cannot believe the State School Board did what they did (to approve the merger). I hate for Kings Mountain to lose control of our system. It (the merger plan) has just never been about children and what's best for them."

Putnam said the 3 1/2 year merger fight has been a long, tough battle.

"It's not something we've taken lightly," she said. "With the informa-

See Merger, 3A

Athletic concerns voiced

By GARY STEWART
 Editor of The Herald

A former Kings Mountain High athlete urged the Board of Education to make a stand either for or against the direction of the athletic program at Monday night's board meeting at Central School.

Kevin Smith, a longtime critic of the athletic program, said the public deserves to know the board's stance on concerns an alumni group has voiced since July 2003.

"You either support it (the athletic program) or you want it to go in another direction," he said.

Sam Smith, another former KMHS football player, said earlier perceptions of the group are now reality. He said Afro-American student athletes are not receiving just recognition, giving

See Concerns, 3A

COWBOY CLASSICS



Corwyn Edwards demonstrates his command of the lasso Saturday at Joy Performance Center as part of a free cowboy classics film and presentation. See story and more photos on 8-A.

ANDIE BRYMER / HERALD

Council tour violation of meetings law?

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
 Staff Writer

A tour of several Kings Mountain city departments by new council members has one man crying foul.

New city council members Houston Corn, Kay Hambricht, Jerry Mullinax and Brenda Ross along with Mayor Rick Murphrey toured the city's peak electrical shavings facility and met with department heads Friday. They also ate lunch together at a local restaurant.

In a letter to Kings Mountain City Manager Phil Ponder, area resident Wayne King asked for an itemized bill for the meal and information on what took place.

King wrote, "As you are aware the Open Meetings Laws of the State of North Carolina prohibit members to gather for meetings which encompass the city business and includes four or more active members of the city council."

King went on to write that he realized Ponder was not at the meeting. He asked the city manager to make council members aware "that the law was violated that day."

See Tour, 3A

County plans for year Defense jobs a priority

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
 Staff Writer

Cleveland County Commissioners met Friday afternoon for a planning session. While economic development and industry retention were tops on their list, several other items were discussed.

Commissioner Ronnie Hawkins told the board that Cleveland had been rated first in the state for heart problems and in child abuse. He said that the lack of jobs contributed to these problems.

Commission Chairperson Mary Accor noted the rise in crime.

Commissioner Willie McIntosh advocated for more workplace diversity. He encouraged minorities and handicapped individuals to apply for county jobs. He also said that the county should look toward diversity as it chooses vendors to do business with.

Accor said the county was looking at homeland security issues and had a "workable plan."

Commissioner Tom Bridges will be meeting with area farmers to find out what qualifications they would like the county's new farm liaison to have.

McIntosh proposed a farm surplus program which would make produce left in the fields available to welfare recipients.

Hawkins told the board that the number of rescue squad volunteers was down. He said that may be because more training is required of these volunteers. He commended the rescue squads for the amount of money they have saved the county. He said with fewer volunteers, the workload and financial burden is shifting more towards the county's emergency medical services department.

Accor told the board that the Commission for Women was going to work on abuse prevention and homelessness.

McIntosh spoke in favor of tightening regulations for taxi operators. He said this would be helpful for tourism.

See Plans, 3A

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
 Staff Writer

SHELBY - Cleveland County Commissioners are looking toward the defense industry to bring new jobs to the region.

The board of commissioners met Friday afternoon for a planning session. Jobs and the landfill were at the top of the agenda.

Commissioners discussed the overall need for more jobs while targeting defense as a specific industry.

Gaston County is already spending money, studying the research and development related aspects of the industry, according to commissioner Willie McIntosh. He would like to see Cleveland go in the same direction.

"It's going to take local politicians to get congress and the senate to approximate federal money," McIntosh said.

In another economic development related move, commissioners discussed having U.S.

74 designated a three-digit interstate highway.

According to commissioner Jerry Self, industries are more likely to locate along roads identified as an interstate instead of a highway. He said the designation process was political.

Commission chairperson Mary Accor said sewer needs to be in place to attract industry as well.

Self suggested an airport zoning overlay which would keep a tower from being built in the flight and landing pattern.

"It's a way to protect an economic asset," Self said.

The area in question is in both the city and county meaning it would require participation by both governmental bodies.

Both Self and McIntosh spoke out in support of expanding the Cleveland County Industrial Park.

McIntosh suggested a partnership with Gardner Webb University to use its gradu

See Jobs, 3A