

**Urban/Rural Committee Meeting
Columbia High School, Lake City
Sept. 1, 2009**

Committee members in attendance:

State Representative Marti Coley, Marianna
Rick Williams, Port St. Joe High School
Bob West, Bishop Kenny High School
Elijah Bell, Jay High School
James Harris, private citizen

The meeting convened at 4:45 p.m. Representative Coley had all the committee members introduce themselves to the public and mentioned that this committee is here to listen to all the issues schools may be facing. Rep. Coley then read the mission statement.

Richard Finlayson, Aucilla Christian (Monticello) principal talked about his school drawing from smaller areas of North Florida as opposed to cities like Tallahassee, which is the closest metro area to Monticello. Mr. Finlayson appreciated the separation of urban and rural schools in the lower two classes of football a few years ago. This helps schools like Aucilla Christian because most of its opponents are similar schools who play middle school students, not because they might be the best athletes, but because they need enough bodies on the roster. And this can become a safety issue against schools in larger areas.

Mr. Finlayson said that he has been in touch with the Florida Coalition of Independent Schools and that the organization is very much in favor of the Urban/Rural Committee discussions. But they know the difficulties of making state-wide decisions because most everything can be a local to regional issue.

Kevin Whittaker, assistant principal at Branford High School, was next to speak. He noticed that many schools in his area with smaller populations seemed to be eliminated from the state football playoffs in the first round many times due to the fact that they are matched up with schools from nearby districts that have larger populations. This has caused some of the smaller schools in the area to drop out of a district and play as an independent.

Mr. Whittaker also noted that the economy is pulling people out of the rural areas and back into the cities so parents can find work. The committee wanted to know how many zip codes Branford was pulling students from and also that of Branford's opponents. It was unknown, but a factor in the numbers can be that rural areas have less zip codes due to smaller populations, yet cover a larger area in square miles. Mr. Whittaker went on to say that while his school and some other schools in the district may have about the same number of students, the demographic and physical attributes of those students greatly differ. And that can create a safety issue on the football field.

Matt Morris, athletic director at The Bolles School in Jacksonville, was third to speak. Mr. Morris said he likes what he hears about the issues being raised, but admitted that he does not have the same small school problems. Mr. Morris worries about having unhappy people again if any major policies are changed to benefit any one group over another. He definitely wants equality and hopes it can be achieved without separating private from public, keeping it on an urban and rural basis.

Closing Comments:

Rick Williams pointed out that schools of near equal sizes do not necessarily have the same demographics of student populations. This creates many situations for injuries on the field. Mr. Williams noted that when deciding anything that will affect opposing teams, the focus should be on the factors for the number of students a school has and not just the number of students a school has.

Marti Coley wanted the committee members and the public audience to spread the word about the committee so there will be bigger turnouts in the future.

Elijah Bell stated while this is the beginning of football season, this matter is very important there should be no excuse to miss the meetings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:40 p.m.