

**Urban/Rural Committee Meeting  
Forest High School, Ocala  
Sept. 21, 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 4:40 p.m. Representative Coley welcomed everyone and stated the purpose of the committee and this meeting. The committee members introduced themselves to the public.

**Kathy Finnucan**, athletic director at Trinity Preparatory School in Winter Park, asked what constituted an urban or rural school. She said there seemed to be a gray area for some in-betweens, and that the difference was based more on geography than on school size. Mr. West mentioned that a city population of 7,500 had been used as a benchmark before. Rep. Coley said maybe the population a private school can draw from should be looked at.

Ms. Finnucan also asked what the phrase “leveling the playing field” means, and how it would be legislated. What happens to schools in an area that has a better training system for certain sports? School systems with freedom of choice have an advantage. One solution could be students who transfer without a full change of address sitting out for a year.

**Mike Maloney**, athletic director at St. Joseph Academy in St. Augustine, provided a packet of information on his school and his concern regarding international students. He said St. Joseph currently has 15 international students, and that international student attendance adds more than \$100,000 to his school’s budget. He is concerned that international students with F-1 Visas cannot live with another student. This makes it hard since another company places the visiting students with families. Rep. Coley asked if those same students would come to his school without the athletic program; he replied that athletics is not a part of the admissions process, and school staff determines athletic interest later, when it is too late. He also mentioned he would like to see more schools in the smaller school classes in football.

**Bert Thomas**, athletic director at Meadowbrook Academy in Ocala, said Meadowbrook joined the FHSAA to do it right and follow the rules. The public schools in his area are willing to play Meadowbrook. If the FHSAA enforces the rules it already has in place, the problems might reduce; some problems arise from a false sense of entitlement. He does not want a separate playoff system for public and private schools because his school has good relations with the nearby public schools. Meadowbrook has 289 students, K-12.

**Dale Toney**, athletic director at Belleview High School, said he is not opposed to playing private schools in the regular season, but state series competition does favor private schools; being able to offer scholarships gives schools a huge advantage. He supports separate playoff systems. He also said transfer rules can create hardships for schools. Mr. Williams asked his opinion on why the issue between public and private schools exists. Mr.

Toney responded that private schools get more students coming out of eighth grade because they have good programs, and that it is not necessarily an unlevel playing field, but that the two types of schools have different situations. Mr. West asked if he thought enforcement of severe penalties would solve some of the problems. Mr. Toney answered that it might solve some, but not all, and cited schools with larger budgets as being able to better handle monetary fines. Mr. West asked if being removed from state series competition would be a deterrent, and Mr. Toney said he thought it would, and that there should be stiffer penalties for schools already on probation for other violations. Ms. Finnucan agreed that penalties could be stiffer, but the FHSAA should not lose sight of the overall purpose being to benefit kids, and that often in recruiting violations, overzealous parents are a problem. She said she would be interested in seeing the winning percentages of public and private schools for all state finals events. Rep. Coley agreed that she does not want to create a system to deny opportunities for kids. Mr. Bell stated that the committee was looking at rural and urban issues instead of public and private issues, and reiterated the need to look at geography.

**Ed McPadden**, athletic director for Marion County Schools, said he is not interested in a public and private school split, and that the committee would need to consider geography. He said the monetary fines for recruiting are not stiff enough, and they either needed to be raised or changed to removal from the state series. He also felt the person responsible for the violation needed to be responsible for the penalty. Mr. Harris said he had no problem with that, and asked where the original problem might lie in recruiting issues. Mr. McPadden answered that parents, students and coaches combined propelled the issue.

**Tom Morris**, athletic director at Taylor High School in Pierson, said some programs recruit themselves because they are so good. He mentioned that Alabama puts private schools one class higher than their enrollment would, and that geography also matters. There is a perception that private school athletic programs are better than public schools, and the All-Sports Awards totals reflect this. He said in the football districts from Class 2A down, the districts have less emphasis on geography, and that his school used to feel it had a chance in the playoffs. Mr. West said there has to be an answer for geographically isolated, locked-in schools to make it fair. Mr. Bell asked if Taylor HS felt it had a chance before due to the similarity in city and school sizes among the district members, and Mr. Morris said yes. Mr. Bell reminded everyone that Alabama does not have the geographic problems Florida does. Mr. Morris said every reclassification process does not have to be a wholesale change. Mr. West said the members of the FHSAA advisory committees needed to be more vocal to the Executive Director and staff about granting appeals in redistricting.

**Jody Phillips**, athletic director at Forest High School in Ocala, talked about attendance and open enrollment. He said his school might have many students who should not be enrolled at Forest; that those students might be ruled ineligible and any teams they played on would be forced to forfeit; and that private schools did not have to deal with that issue. He said the All-Sports Awards totals in Classes 3A, 2A and 1A are skewed toward private schools, and that something needed to address the imbalance. He said football reclassification became a problem for Forest because there was no other school its size nearby, and that he would like to see a classification committee to address issues. He restated that there needed to be some type of level field regarding attendance. Rep. Coley asked if a state policy was the answer, and Mr. Phillips replied that he did not see another answer.

**Kathy Finnucan** said classification was easier in the 1970s because there were fewer schools. She also mentioned that Trinity Prep is not competitive in every sport. She said the crux of the matter is that Florida has schools in locked-in areas where enrollment growth is not possible, and she could understand how that creates a sense of the “haves” and “have nots.” Why not have a separate class in all sports for those rural schools? She restated she would like to see the public-private winning percentage data updated. She said some schools chose to move up a class in reclassification to avoid playing powerhouse programs, which was wrong, but would happen if the opportunity was provided. Mr. Bell agreed, and said “rural” and “urban” needed to be defined, and the committee might have to think outside the box. He also agreed with the statement on reclassification.

### **Closing Comments:**

**Rick Williams** said “opportunity” was a very strong theme at this meeting, and that it is unfair for schools with different levels of opportunity to have to compete; is there a possibility of rural, urban and superurban classes?

**James Harris** said he was getting a better sense of the committee’s direction, and that a definition of “rural” and “urban” is needed.

**Elijah Bell** thanked everyone for coming. He said he lives this every day and wants it to be fair. He said the urban-rural concept needed to be tried, because currently larger areas have the advantage.

**Bob West** thanked everyone for coming, and reminded everyone to keep the focus on urban-rural issues instead of public and private. He also reminded everyone that the FHSAA had committees in place to address other issues. He thanked Forest HS for its hospitality.

**Marti Coley** thanked everyone for coming. She said the terms needed to be defined, and stated the need to look at the classification system and the penalty system. She said the audience had been extremely helpful. She wants to keep kids in the forefront, with safety and fairness in mind, and give them hope for achievement.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:30 p.m.