

Kenosha News
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County: Youth will be allowed in most closed sessions
By: Joe Potente

The Youth in Governance program is geared to give area high school students an insider's look at government by allowing them to participate on Kenosha County Board committees. But should that view include a seat at the table in sensitive, closed-session discussions?

The full board took this issue on earlier this week, debating vigorously until it was decided that the students would be allowed in closed sessions - unless the committee in question votes to exclude them when deemed appropriate.

During the debate Tuesday night, supervisors' ideologies clashed between those who believed letting Youth in Governance members into closed session added essential value to the students' experiences and those who felt teens have no place in sensitive, personnel-related discussions where names are named and sexually explicit topics may come up.

"Who are we to judge the maturity of these youth?" asked Supervisor Kim Breunig, the chairwoman of the Extension Education and Conservation Committee and an advocate of a complete, open-door policy on Youth in Governance members in closed sessions.

Launched last year, Youth in Governance allows area high school students to sit in, join debates and cast advisory votes in County Board committee meetings. The program, which drew 10 students last year, doubled its participation level this year.

Members, who must apply through the Kenosha County UW Extension office, are each assigned to a specific board committee for one year. Last year, no policy was in place to govern whether Youth in Governance members should stay or go when a committee goes into executive session.

Current and former members of the Administration Committee - the panel that handles county employee grievances - warned against including minors and non-county employees in sensitive discussions.

Supervisor Doug Noble said he has been in grievance hearings that involve sexually explicit content. Supervisor Dennis Elverman recalled an instance in which a plain-clothed, armed police officer was placed in a closed Administration Committee session because a grievance party was believed to have made physical threats.

Supervisor Jim Huff said, "Names are used; witnesses names accused. That's very sensitive information."

Breunig noted that Youth in Governance members would be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, though other supervisors doubted that such a pact would be enforceable when signed by a minor.

Supervisor Bob Haas took a hard-line stand, questioning why Youth in Governance members should even be considered for attendance in closed sessions.

"We're talking about youth here, high school kids," Haas said. "They shouldn't be allowed to go into a closed session, period."

On the other side of the debate, Supervisor Dayvin Hallmon urged his colleagues to consider what today's youth have experienced while growing up. He suggested there is no reason to shelter them.

Supervisor Ronald Johnson said he saw no reason not to support inviting the students in. "I think they're old enough to do their job responsibly, and I think they should be able to do it," Johnson said.

Supervisor Mark Modory introduced the eventual compromise, later amended by board Vice Chairwoman Anita Faraone, to allow for committees to vote to remove Youth in Governance members from closed sessions on a case-by-case basis. It passed 22-5, with dissent from Supervisors Jeffrey Gentz, Jim Moore, Ronald Johnson, Breunig and Hallmon.

Supervisor Mark Molinaro Jr., one of the originators of Youth in Governance, said he did not expect controversial closed sessions to occur often.

"I think the examples are going to be very few and far between," he said.