

Kenosha News

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County considers youth input

By Emily Ayshford

Teenagers on the County Board?

It's a new idea, especially considering the average age of the board is about 57.

In other words, the board is, like, old. But at the suggestion of supervisor Mark Molinaro, County Board supervisors, UW-Extension officials, local officials and teenagers met Wednesday and hashed out how youth could get a voice on the county's ultimate deciding body.

"I want something that's going to energize the students," Molinaro said. "I think this is a step in the right direction."

And so did those who got together and discussed how to approach the move.

"An educated constituency is always a good thing," said Judge Mary K. Wagner. "I think it's really important for youth to have ownership of their future."

Central High School sophomore Ben Kopczynski said teenagers could bring a new perspective to the board.

"Their minds are young and fresh," he said. "And they hate doing things the way they are supposed to be done."

Others said that bringing youth into the local government process could help them feel part of the community - which could translate into higher voter turnout and more government involvement when they are older.

John de Montmollin, Kenosha County UW-Extension youth and family educator, said youth should have some input into plans that will affect them 20 years down the road, and such participation could result in other boards in the county giving youth a chance.

If Kenosha County were to give youth some sort of place on the board or on committees, it would be the first county in the area to do so.

Douglas County has had youth serve on its County Board for several years, while counties such as Jackson County have added youth to certain committees. Ozaukee County has a youth group that gives input to local agencies, while Burnett County has surveyed youth for its strategic planning process.

The teenagers' vote would likely be advisory, and youth members would likely be high school students.

Dan Hill, a UW-Extension local government specialist, said that if the board does take on youth, it has to make sure supervisors know what they are doing.

Supervisors need to create an environment where youth feel comfortable contributing, and the board should avoid the appearance of "tokenism," he said.

One might ask why the board should give youth special status; he said, while others might feel that teenagers have no place on the board.

Other hindrances might be getting teenagers to come to the County Board chambers - especially those who don't have a driver's license to get there as well as deciding whether to compensate youth members.

His advice was to "keep it simple to begin with.

To go from here, officials will see if there are teenagers who are willing to commit to such a place and decide which model is best.

No timetable has been set for presenting a resolution, but when one is created, the decision will come down to a County Board vote.