

Kenosha News

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County officials open door to involve youths in government

by Gary J. Kunich

Kenosha teenagers are a step away from having input on all policies affecting the county.

The new Youth *in* Governance program got the green light from several Kenosha County Board committees Wednesday evening.

If the County Board approves the resolution as expected Tuesday, the program will start in September and allow up to 18 teenagers from all area high schools, and those who are home schooled, to sit in and voice their opinions on all the county committees, from highways and parks to judiciary and law. Each teen will serve a one-year term and can reapply for the program the following year.

The program will be overseen by the county's University of Wisconsin-Extension office, which will get the word out, go through applications and match up students with different committees.

"I think we have the potential to create a program that fosters real involvement to the youth, and hopefully spreads to the city and other areas," said Supervisor Mark Molinaro, who helped initiate the program over a year ago.

The purpose is to not only give teenagers a voice in the community, but also demonstrate how local government works, Molinaro said.

He told members of three committees - extension and education, judiciary and law, and legislative - that statistics show only 23 percent of youth believe they are valued by the community and only 27 percent believe they are given useful roles in the community.

Abrianna Barca, a Bradford High School senior who helped build the Youth in Governance program from the ground up, said this could change those perceptions.

"I feel it myself," Barca said. "I'm involved in so much within Bradford and I feel I have a voice there, but there aren't many opportunities outside of Bradford. I'm glad to be able to pioneer this. I just wished I could have one more year in high school so I could participate.

"We live here, so we are directly affected by what happens. We drive on the streets. A lot of times in government, the youth are overlooked, but we are the top consumers. This gives all of us a chance to have a say."

Although any votes the students make will be nonbinding - meaning they don't carry legal weight - their input will be recorded on committee minutes and considered when supervisors make decisions.

Requirements to participate:

- Students must be high school students between the ages of 16 to 18.
- Must have a 2.5 or greater grade point average.
- Must be a Kenosha County resident.
- Must be able to attend the monthly meetings.
- Must be able to attend additional committee meetings that are combined with other committees.

John de Montmollin, the youth and family educator for UW-Extension, said the requirements were kept loose to attract all students.

"What we are most looking for is passion," he said. Someone has a passion for money we'll put them on a finance committee. "If some is passionate about the environment, we'll put them on the parks or land use committee. We wanted to cast a wide net to get everyone involved. We want to hear different voices around the table."