18 teens join Youth in Governance

Program allows students to chime in on debates

BY JOE POTENTE
jpotente@kenoshanews.com

Some local high school students are taking their seats on County Board committees, as Kenosha County's Youth in Governance program saw in its fourth class of participants earlier this month.

Youth in Governance allows 18 teens to be members of each of the board's nine standing committees.

The youths' votes are not included in the recommendations the committees make to the full board, but the students do have the chance to chime in freely on debates.

"I liked that it was real, I guess," said Jared Ottman, a Central High School senior who is graduating after two years in Youth in Governance. "It wasn't like a mock U.N. type of thing; it was the real deal. Sitting at the table, you felt like you were a part of something; you were contributing."

John de Montmollin, youth and family educator with the Kenosha County University of Wisconsin Extension, said the new class of participants includes representatives from Central, Bradford, Tremper and St. Joseph high schools and Harboride and Indian Trail academies.

Students join the program in the spring of their sophomore or junior years, participating for about 12 months. Applicants are first nominated by teachers or other adults and then they go through an interview process. They must have at least a 2.5 grade-point average.

Once chosen, the students are assigned to a mentor on their committees.

The nine supervisor mentors this year are Joe Clark, Finance Committee; Boyd Frederick, Legislative; Gail Gontz, Administration; Erin Decker, Land Use; John O'Day, Highway and Parks; Rob Zerban, Building and Grounds; Jeffrey Gontz, Human Services; David Singer, Judiciary and Law; and Dayvin Hallmon, Extension Education.

County Board Chairman Mark Molinaro Jr., who was instrumental in the formation of Youth in Governance about four years ago, said he hopes the program energizes the teens to remain involved in the politics after they are of age to vote and run for office.

"If the end result of this is simply that we get more and more young people engaged in the process of voting at election time, then, for me, it's been a success," Molinaro said.

De Montmollin said the program offers two distinct roles for the youths: learning and contributing.

The major focus now, he said, is to provide environments where participants can do both. This year, for the first time, the students will take a daylong tour of all of the departments in county government, which de Montmollin said is a response to the youths' desire for more information about how the county works.

"I think we're getting to the point where we're humming along pretty good now," de Montmollin said.

About to enter her senior year at Tremper High School, Alice Wei is the only returning Youth in Governance member this year. She said the program has taught her a lot about how county government affects residents.

Wei, who sat on the Human Services Committee last year and will sit on Judiciary and Law this year, said the experience has exceeded her expectations.

"I didn't realize that I would be so engaged in the committee," she said.