

Council to give youth a voice in the community

Galax Gazette 4/4/2008 - By April Wright

Local teens have formed the area's first-ever youth council to enhance leadership and provide a voice and opportunities among their peers in the Twin Counties and Galax.

The Tri-area Committee for Youth (TAKY) is a step to counteract problems and pressures that teens often face such as alcohol and drug use, pregnancy and getting adequate respect from adults.

Oliver McBride, executive director of the Crossroads Institute, said it's important to know what young people are saying.

"Otherwise the community grows older and older. We need young people to become knowledgeable and active in providing leadership in the community, he said.

"It really seems people are very excited about this opportunity for young people. People anticipate what we will have to offer and [seem eager to offer support] as we try to implement this regional youth community."

Area high school students recently brainstormed ideas that would provide entertainment, leadership and political opportunities for today's young people.

The committee includes Daniel Taylor, Victoria Beamer, Meredith Cox and Kevin Snow of Grayson County High School; Shannon Pryor, Brittany Dixon, Charley Adams and Frances Roldan of Galax High School; and Laura Holderfield, Candace Bolt, Austin Larrowe and Jennifer Griffin of Carroll County High School.

They were led by McBride and moderators Sarah Helms, Remington Bolt, Kevin Spurlin and Emily Nester.

Forming the group was an idea that 60 local teens conjured after participating in the youth forum "Youth Creating Tomorrow's Opportunities Today," at Crossroads in February.

The forum was in support of Southern Growth Policies Board and in partnership with the Crossroads Institute and Virginia Cooperative Extension.

During the forum, students voiced concerns and ideas about spurring economic growth, leadership, workforce readiness and volunteerism. The forum was to encourage young people to be active in sustaining and improving local quality of life.

TAKY will continue to meet the first and third Tuesday of each month.

"If we [permanently] form this council, this is an opportunity for the youth to have a voice in the community," McBride said. "This is a very special opportunity."

The possibilities for events seemed endless. TAKY attendees tossed out ideas about having a youth club where teens can dance and have dinner; video game nights featuring Guitar Hero and Dance Dance Revolution; Battle of the Bands concerts; and game tournaments including ping pong and bowling.

As for educational opportunities, McBride pitched the idea of having formal nights at Bogeys or The Hardware Co. restaurants to offer etiquette classes and programs such as cooking, healthy foods, and banking that would prepare students for college.

TAKY is trying to rapidly spread its name throughout the region in hopes that programs and organizations, such as the VFW and the Galax Recreation Center, will lend a helping hand by providing a venue to sponsor events.

"If we can get places to sponsor events, I think we might end up with significant activities happening each month," McBride said.

Students who participated in the youth forum are invited to an April 29 meeting to provide event suggestions and help with upcoming events.

TAKY has already been recognized by local business Stringbean Cafe in downtown Galax, which hosted a Guitar Hero tournament.

The committee plans to host mentoring programs to enhance skills (such as self-defense), computer courses, and developing internship opportunities in local government.

"This is a special opportunity for young people to learn and serve," McBride said.

TAKY presented ideas to governing bodies of each locality and has received a positive response. It is letting the local government know that its voice and input is important.

"We're really counting on you to see this through, so don't let this opportunity die," Galax City Manager Keith Holland told students at the first meeting.

The TAKY meetings were attended by Holland, Galax Tourism Director Chuck Riedhammer, and Neil Satterwhite of Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Authority.

The committee will work on implementing new ideas, setting bylaws, a mission statement and forming a Web site that will contain youth-friendly events around the community.

Since the committee met last week, McBride has provided an office for TAKY at Crossroads as a place where the group can organize activities. A sub-group was formed to develop and launch its web page, which will include upcoming events and job listings for youth.

For questions or information about TAKY, contact McBride at omcbride@crossroadsva.org.