Youth enthusiastic to have seat at County Board’s table

Governance program helps give local teens details, insight

By Joe Potente
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Like many teenagers, Alice Wei didn’t know much about government beyond the presidency, Congress and maybe her state senator.

That all changed, she said, after she joined Youth in Governance — a program that allows Kenosha County high school students the opportunity to sit as non-voting members on the County Board’s standing committees.

“After serving two years on the program, I’ve been amazed about everything Kenosha County does, from transportation and health services to infrastructure,” said the recent Tremper High School graduate, addressing the County Board recently.

The program, now in its fifth year, installed a new class of participants last month, sending Wei and her fellow graduates off with an enhanced understanding and involvement in local affairs.

High demand

Teddi Winnett, director of the Kenosha County University of Wisconsin Extension — the facilitator of Youth in Governance — said the program has blossomed beyond its advocates’ expectations.

This year, she said, her office received 186 nominations from nine schools and 37 applications for the 14 available yearlong committee slots.

Of those 37, the County Board’s Extension Education and Conservation Committee interviewed 25 and sent 14 recommendations to board Chairman Mark Molinaro Jr. (shown here). Four are returning members from last year.

One of the new participants, Tremper junior Paige Schultz, said she is excited to see how meetings are run and decisions are made, and how she can contribute to the process.

“My government teacher, Mr. (Dan) Proznanski at Tremper High School, he really influenced me into getting into the program because he just made my class really interesting,” Schultz said.

A seat at the table

When Schultz attends her first meeting on the Finance and Administration Committee later this month, she will receive a seat at the table alongside the elected supervisors and an ability to add freely to the discussion, within the bounds of Roberts Rules of Order.

Participants are paired with mentors from the board. This year’s participants are Supervisors Kim Breunig, Erin Decker, Gail Gentz, Jeffrey Gentz, Dayvin Hallmon, William P. Michel II and Rob Zeman.

Winnett said past participants have almost universally said Youth in Governance provided an opportunity to learn, as well as to feel valued.

“They say, ‘I can say something and share an opinion and they actually listen to me,’” Winnett said.

At the same time, Winnett said supervisors tell her they appreciate having younger viewpoints at the table.

“When the youth speak, (supervisors) say, ‘Wow, I never thought of it from that perspective before,’” Winnett said.

‘Customer for life’

Molinaro, an early champion of the program, said he has been pleased with its development.

“It seems every year, the program gets stronger and stronger,” Molinaro said. “The students seem to find their voice sooner and sooner, and it’s clear the word is getting out about the program.”

Molinaro said Youth in Governance supports a “customer-for-life concept” — that is, that engaging people in the democratic process at a young age will pay off when they grow into tomorrow’s leaders.

Wei, who will attend UW-Madison this fall, said Youth in Governance molded her and her fellow participants into better leaders.

“But more importantly,” Wei said, “I’ve discovered that the leadership of Kenosha truly works for the citizens of the county. It’s so great knowing that I’m living — and we’ve all been living — in a place that’s governed by leaders who truly care about their constituents.”