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Durham Youth Council in session Panel will advise city officials on issues important to young people

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BY GINNY SKALSKI gskalski@heraldsun.com; 419-6636

Jordan High School junior Ashlee Hicks didn't try to sugarcoat her opinion of the three most pressing topics facing young people in Durham when she penned the essay that helped secure her seat on the city's new Youth Council.

"Durham youths face many issues today that would have been the substance of a horror movie half a century ago," the 16-year-old wrote. "Decreasing educational opportunities, drug use and social displacement scream for the attention of our adults."

Her solutions?

Create more extracurricular programs, develop a program encouraging teen drug users to admit their problems without fear of legal consequences and promote tolerance through seminars and peer tutoring networks.

Hicks was among nearly 100 applicants who revealed what they believe needs to be fixed in Durham to improve the quality of life for youth.

Thirty of the junior high and high school students were picked to serve on the City Council's newest and youngest advisory group -- the Durham Youth Council.

The students will meet regularly to discuss issues such as curfew, youth employment and recreational opportunities. Ultimately, they will tell the City Council what's important to people their age.

"They have real deep insights into the issues that affect them," said councilwoman Cora Cole-McFadden, who made organizing the group a priority this year.

During their one-year tenure, youth council members must complete 10 hours of community service with an approved agency, complete service projects and participate in city-sponsored special events. They also will serve as nonvoting members on city boards and committees.

In their application essays, the sixth- through 12th-graders picked for the council overwhelmingly listed gangs, drugs and peer pressure as the biggest issues youth in Durham encounter.

Other commonly listed problems were violence, sex and teen pregnancy, drinking and even pressure on students to pass standardized tests.

"I believe more test preparation classes should be implemented in communities to help all students, wealthy or poor, to allow a student a fair opportunity to obtain a high score on these standardized tests," wrote Antonio Harper, a Hillside High School sophomore.

Former Jordan High School student DeWarren Langley has pushed for years to create a Durham Youth Council. While he was in high school, Langley lobbied city and county officials to give students a voice through an organized panel.

"It brings an unheard voice to the decision-making table and an unheard perspective of what's going on in our schools, in our streets and in our community, and that's a dialogue that needs to be heard," said Langley, a cousin of former City Council member Angela Langley.

Now a sophomore at Hampton University, Langley returned to Durham recently to watch the Youth Council members -- dressed in business attire -- stand in the City Council chambers and repeat the oath of office after the city clerk.

For most of the students, it was their first City Council meeting. Topping the agenda was the unveiling of the city's draft budget for next year.

But when Cole-McFadden suggested they stay to get briefed, most of the youths quickly filed out of the chambers.

Parents had to sign a permission form acknowledging they were aware their child was applying. Councilwomen Diane Catotti and Cole-McFadden met with parents of youth council members and alternates last week to explain how important it was for the students to attend every meeting.

Brenda Hayes-Bright signed off on the permission form for her 16-year-old daughter Victoria Bright, who was selected as an alternate to the council.

Victoria previously lived in Wilmington and only recently moved to Durham. Still, her mother believes she and the other students are interested in what their city government is doing.

"I think they pay more attention than people think and they really want the opportunity to make things better for themselves," said Brenda Hayes-Bright. "It's great that they want the input from people who are actually involved."

There are 22 alternates who will fill in for youth council members who can't make it to meetings or other events. The alternates also will be encouraged to join community organizations, such as the Partners Against Crime groups, to promote neighborhood involvement.

"We need them to help build strong communities," Cole-McFadden said. "Durham at large has to have strong neighborhoods. [We] cannot have a strong community without the youth."

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