

Developing community leaders

“Thriving Youth” and “Community Involvement and Leadership” are two Extension priorities. In the summer, a multi-disciplinary Extension team partnered with DeKalb County government officials, school counselors, and even a frozen custard shop to host “Hometown Leaders,” a program piloted by Extension the previous summer in Boone County.

The three-part program is designed to introduce high-school youth to county government services and career opportunities. The Extension team’s recruiting differed somewhat from the 2023 program, as the team did not confine its recruitment to 4-H members but rather contacted high-school advisors across DeKalb County for recommendations on high school juniors and seniors who might express interest and commit.

The program began in April with a classroom session about the history and structure of county government, led by Community Economic Development Extension Educator Mike Delany in cooperation with Deputy County Administrator Derek Hiland and County Board Chair Ellingsworth Webb, who also shared their career path experiences.

In May, the students visited a DeKalb County Board meeting. As it turned out, the group got even more than they could have hoped for, as several matters were raised and debated at the meeting that were very current and somewhat contentious issues in local news coverage. These issues included the arrival in the county of the first tribal reservation in Illinois, along with the always difficult deliberations surrounding the operation and potential sale of the county’s nursing home. Thanks to the quick thinking of one county board member early in the meeting, the committee members created and passed a special motion to extend, specifically and solely for the Hometown Leaders student attendees, the normally limited time for audience comments during the meeting.

In June, the group spent a full day visiting DeKalb County government sites. This session offered the students opportunities to view a broad array of county offices and activities, ranging from active courtrooms in the DeKalb County Courthouse to live 911 calls in the DeKalb County Sheriff’s Communication Center. At each location, a host explained the functions of the department and potential career paths. The morning and afternoon visits were separated by a working lunch, where students assumed the role of a county official in a mock “county committee meeting.” Members of county administration represented the public, presenting issues for resolution. The students had the opportunity to discuss topics recently debated by the county board with administrators and board members.

At the conclusion of the day, participants were treated to custard donated by a local Culver’s restaurant. When asked for a show of hands in response to the question of how many felt they had learned something new over the course of the day, all participants responded in the affirmative. The county administrators and county board members, for their part, concluded the day by expressing their own gratitude to the Extension team for this opportunity to interact with these young folks and present to them a “real life” look at the variety of careers as a public servant in county government in DeKalb County.