

Extension in civic engagement

Here in northwestern Illinois, there is a concern Extension staff consistently hear: the younger generation is departing from their small, rural communities to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Research indicates that “youth must be fully engaged and involved in change efforts at the community level if they are to learn to function as effective members of society.”

Understanding that community-engaged youth feel a greater sense of belonging, are more aware of local opportunities, and are more likely to stay or return to rural communities, Extension has developed several career and civic engagement youth programs with that aim.

Partnering with Boone County administration and elected and appointed officials, 4-H youth had an opportunity to participate in a pilot civic engagement program titled “Hometown Leaders.”

Part One of the program was a short presentation at the 4-H Federation meeting titled “Intro to County Government,” delivered by Boone County Treasurer Curtis Newport. Then county board member Alisa Patterson introduced the group to the solar farm development proposal, which was to be debated at the next county board meeting. We believe if youth get involved in our community and become more aware of the opportunities that exist here, they are more likely to stay.

In Part Two of the series, the cohort attended a county board meeting where the solar farm development was strongly debated, giving the youth a taste of the local legislative process at work. They also met with county board members and administration.

In Part Three, the group spent a day visiting Boone County’s administrative offices and facilities. The youth were able to see county government personnel in action, recording legal transactions, assessing and collecting taxes, enforcing zoning regulations, caring for public health, maintaining highways, and protecting the citizenry. They sat in the jury box, interacted with a judge, and met with three county board mentors who shared how they became elected representatives, revealing that individuals who participate in county government come from all walks of life and vocations. They spent more than six hours learning about the county government’s services, careers, and civic engagement opportunities.

Through a follow-up survey, the Extension team learned this was the first time most participants had ever visited the county offices or attended a County Board meeting. As a

result of the program, the cohort reported an increased awareness of public services and career opportunities.

Time will tell what change this might create in their behavior and the benefits the community will reap, but it's a good start.