

HHS seniors get ready for Civic Action Project

By Kat Gore Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, September 16, 2015 3:56 pm

Students brainstormed with mayor

Four senior civics classes at Healdsburg High School are gearing up for a project-based learning program that aims to better the community, known as the Civic Action Project (CAP). The 10-week assignment is new this year and under the direction of HHS civics teacher Eric OConnor.

CAP is through the Constitutional Rights Foundation and involves doing a civic action project in a local community. Students identify an issue or problem that is important to them and then take “civic actions” to try to impact their selected issue or problem.

“They’re learning structure of government, and instead of memorizing and regurgitating standard stuff, they are going out and practicing it, and actually doing something,” OConnor said. “Students get some flexibility and they take on a project that’s a passion of theirs, which increases internal motivation.”

OConnor said that his goal for the assignment is for students to realize that individuals can make a change in community.

“Participating in government is not just casually voting every two or four years. Government affects your life every day and I want them (the students) to be aware that there are a lot of different ways you can interact with government to help people,” he said.

On Monday, Aug. 31, Mayor Shaun McCaffery and community members Angela and Whit Larsen visited the four civics classes to help students brainstorm project ideas and to answer questions.

When McCaffery asked one class if there was something about Healdsburg that annoyed them or that they’d like to change, many seniors answered with the cost of living in town. The students then asked the mayor what the city was doing about the housing crisis, and asked questions about short term rentals, the Midtowne housing development, the roundabout, Memorial Bridge, renovations to the Carson Warner Memorial Skatepark, the SMART train, when the fire trails will open, a possible stop sign or light at a dangerous intersection, what is being done to combat the drought, desalination and the high school’s closed campus rule.



Brainstorming

Community members (from left) Angela and Whit Larsen and Mayor Shaun McCaffery visited Healdsburg High School on Aug. 31 to meet with seniors about their civic action projects.

After each class had been visited, McCaffery sat at a table in the lunch area outside and students came up to sit with him and talk and ask questions about the city.

“I thought it would be a really cool opportunity to learn from our young people and drum up support for our housing committee. We had some good questions,” McCaffery said about his visit.

By now, all students have an idea of what they want their project to be, such as putting in a stop sign or light at an intersection they find dangerous or converting grassy lawns to something more drought-tolerant.

Most of the students are working on individual projects, with some in groups. On Sept. 24 and 25, the students will present a one-minute pitch of their idea, and the week before Thanksgiving they will do a five-minute presentation on the results of their completed projects. There are other aspects of the project; such as interviewing a community member and writing a letter to an elected politician, OConnor said.

Superintendent Chris Vanden Heuvel said that McCaffery’s visit provided an opportunity for HHS students to see civics in action. Vanden Heuvel said that students were able to voice their ideas and concerns about their community - from housing issues to food trucks - and learn more about civic processes that will better empower them to exercise their voice as concerned citizens.

“He (McCaffery) was open, transparent and readily fielded any questions, often taking notes to follow up on later,” Vanden Heuvel said. “We appreciate his willingness to give up a day to meet with our students - it was the perfect way to kick off their civic action projects.”

High school seniors better community and beyond through projects

By Kat Gore Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, December 2, 2015 4:17 pm

Senior civics students finish Civic Action Project program

Four senior civics classes at Healdsburg High School recently put their best feet forward to change the community, nation and maybe even the world through civic action projects. Students identified an issue that was important to them and then took civic actions to try to positively impact the problem. Students' projects included: joining the Sonoma County Junior Commission on Human Rights and raising money to end food insecurity, using the county's "SoCo Report It" service to fix potholes on Limerick Lane, working to bring a financial literacy program to the high school, educating freshmen about mental illness issues, teaching junior high students organizational skills, teaching elementary students about littering and recycling and many more.

The eight-week assignment is new this year and under the direction of HHS civics teacher Eric OConnor. The project-based learning program, known as the Civic Action Project, is through the Constitutional Rights Foundation. With about 120 students, there were around 100 total projects – a small number of students worked in pairs.

During the week before Thanksgiving, students gave five-minute presentations on the results of their completed projects. On Thursday, Nov. 19, students in OConnor's third period civics class made presentations on topics including smoking in public, gang prevention, immigration, domestic violence, gender-neutral bathrooms, housing for Valley Fire victims, excessive police force, littering and recycling, auto and home car washes, bringing a new restaurant into Healdsburg, the homeless and girls in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education). The students reviewed each other's presentations on laptops after each presentation.

Jesus Castro presented his project on gender-neutral bathrooms to the class. He said he got the idea from gender-neutral bathrooms that were at a football game.



Demonstration

Maria Rodriguez presents her civic action project to her civics class on Thursday, Nov. 19. Rodriguez's project was on smoking in public places, which is prohibited in parks and enclosed public places in Healdsburg.

“My idea was to bring diversity to Healdsburg,” Castro said.

Castro said he decided to go to local companies/stores and ask them to switch their male and female bathroom signs with gender-neutral signs. He said he got rejected a lot, but he was able to convince O’Reilly Auto Parts to install a gender-neutral sign on their employee bathroom door. “After looking at the sign, you can tell there is no discrimination. It’s just a bathroom that anyone can use,” he said.

Projects that reached beyond the local level included an initiative to label genetically modified organisms, which led to email exchanges with California Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, a mammogram pledge project, care packages for deployed soldiers, sending books abroad and several projects that taught others and/or spread awareness on various subjects.

Local projects that students plan to continue include a website and organizing materials to help more HHS seniors find college scholarships, the development of a downtown community mural, fundraising for the Healdsburg wrestling team, development of an adult flag football league, a stop sign near Giorgi Park and helping the homeless obtain more permanent overnight shelter, while others will help collect needed items for the homeless, OConnor said.

City Councilmember Gary Plass said he was “blown away” by some of the projects that students presented to the City Council.

Some students were unable to complete their projects’ goals due to bureaucratic red tape.

In the projects’ early stages, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Community Affairs Coordinator Judy Edmonds visited OConnor’s classroom, along with other AAUW, Rotary and community leaders, to listen to the students present ideas on possible projects.

“I was really amazed. Some of them were very mature and adult,” Edmonds said. “It was impressive.”

The group, including Edmonds, came back to watch the students’ final presentations.

“I was so disappointed and upset when [some students] were saying they tried to go to the city and were told to go somewhere else, and then were told to go back to the city, and no one would take responsibility. This is so sad because these kids are trying to be good citizens and adults and they’re excited about what they’re doing,” Edmonds said.

OConnor said that although many students struggled with bureaucratic barriers, they still learned a lot and the program will be done again next year.

“The students were incredible. All projects were ‘passion’ projects developed, planned and executed by the students. With this inquiry-based approach, students have the autonomy to address a community problem that is meaningful to them. Since the project has purpose and is authentic, the students are driven to deeper learning,” OConnor said. “The students also were able to interact and discuss their projects with wonderful volunteers from the AAUW, the City Council, Rotary and others.”