

# South Shore teens take charge of issues facing them

By Kathryn Reed

So many groups on the South Shore are dedicated to providing services to youth. It's adults identifying problems or noting successes; it's adults finding solutions. Seldom, though, are the youths asked what they think.

In a twist seldom seen, the adults in the room Wednesday night deferred to high school students. Daniel Reyes, chairman that night for the South Lake Tahoe Youth Commission Focus Group, told Boys & Girls Club Executive Director Karen Houser she could speak further when the "open forum" part of the agenda came up.



South Lake  
Tahoe Youth  
Commission  
Focus Group

Houser was fine with that.

Reyes sounded like he had been running a meeting for more years than he's been alive. He didn't let people ramble on too much. He kept to the agenda. He asked for motions to be made, votes to be cast.

The chairman duties rotate each meeting, as does operations

officer and clerk. Elsa Garcia was operations officer for the night, while Ashni Patel was tasked with taking minutes on a laptop.

This group of young people fluctuates between seven and 12 at a meeting. They've been meeting since October.

"This is more about governance and not activities," Houser said. "They are focusing on issues of South Lake Tahoe (that youths care about) – gangs, transportation, lack of employment, the environment."

For now the local Boys & Girls Club oversees the group, with Shawn Tonozzi and Mary Cook the adult leaders. They work for the Boys & Girls Club. Neither appears to be much older than the teens in the room.

Tonozzi acts like an executive director would.

The goal is the group will become an official commission with teens from both sides of the state line involved. Talks are under way with South Lake Tahoe Parks and Recreation Commission for the youth to be under their auspices because the city is not creating any more standalone commissions that report to the City Council. The parks group will likely take this up a meeting later this spring.

It could be that after the Youth Commission becomes official, a commissioner may be a liaison to other city commissions. Parks and Rec is a natural because it deals with youth activities.

With the number of Latinos in the community, it's possible a student could be a rep to the Latino Commission. The environment is of clear importance to this group based on the conversation, so the Sustainability Commission may be another route they will pursue.

One of the tasks this week was to give input for Tonozzi and

Cook as they create an application for perspective Youth Commission members. Tonozzi gave them the option to let the adults create the form. The youths unequivocally wanted input.

A minimum 2.5gpa was suggested, they agreed the form should only be in English, they want to ask about community service, to allow ninth-graders and older be voting members, and younger members to have a non-voting status.

At a future meeting they'll approve the application.

Ernie Claudio, an adviser to the group, brought in examples of what other youth commissions focus on. The purpose and structure of the commission are still things to be defined and refined.

The idea is the youth will develop the answers to issues facing them and offer solutions. Several adults are already coming to them to share how they can help or might like the youth to help them.

Keith Taylor, who is doing his senior project on youth commissions, told his peers about how groups like this are found throughout the world. He talked about a youth camp going on in China now and how Mexico City is hosting a world youth conference in August.

A major endeavor the youth are undertaking is a summit on Nov. 2-3. The students will stay at Stanford Sierra Camp at Fallen Leaf Lake. It will be about team building, governance and it will have an environmental component – per the task force's request.

The next meeting is May 4 at 6:30pm at the Boys & Girls Club in the old Al Tahoe Elementary School in South Lake Tahoe. The public is welcome.