

Teens need voice in area youth projects

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The proposed loss of funding for the Durham Youth Coordinating Board is a great disappointment.

Although the youth coordinating board was not state mandated, it has provided some wonderful opportunities and services for the youth community. That could all end tonight if the county manager's proposed budget is approved without any changes.

After investing about \$700,000 into the board during the last few years, the five employees on the board would be reassigned as part of County Manager Mike Ruffin's proposed 2002-03 budget. With the employees' potential transfers, the Durham Parks and Recreation Department would absorb the Youth Advisory Board, the actual youth component of the youth coordinating board, and the county would save \$173,000.

The primary reason the board was labeled "a failed department" is due to the lack of youth involvement. If Durham youth had a formal voice in local politics and decision-making, this surely would not be an issue.

That voice could come in the form of a youth commission which would advise and assist the local government bodies - the school board, city council and county commissioners.

The Durham Youth Coordinating Board formed in December 1997 through an agreement between city and county governments following a recommendation by a task force on violence prevention.

That task force determined that the youth board would help improve the ability of public and private agencies to promote health, safety and education of Durham's youth and promote common goals among agencies involved in youth development.

As an attempt to bridge the communication gap between city and county governments, the Youth Advisory Board was established in April 2000.

That board meets once a month and assists in minimizing community problems relating to youth and encourages positive growth that is alcohol and drug free.

Four years ago, County Commission Chairwoman MaryAnn E. Black pointed to building up the Durham Youth Coordinating Board as part of her re-election campaign. While commendable, she should have involved youth in the board's development.

Questions also arise when elected officials propose initiatives during re-election campaigns to gain support, then allow the project to fall through during difficult financial times, particularly when the official is not seeking re-election. Candidates for local and national public office must stop playing politics - doing what is necessary to get elected and not doing their best for those they represent, including youth.

Local elected officials cannot continue making decisions without including those the decisions affect. Many officials, it seems, have a strong passion for wanting to help youth, yet they fail to realize that including them in the decision-making process is best.

If decisions regarding youth are made without their input, the end result will be "failed projects" just like the Durham Youth Coordinating Board.

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