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Marjorie Berman, 15, left, a Wyomissing High School sophomore, and Whitnie Mays, 16, a Daniel Boone junior, participate Thursday in a discussion on shaping Berks communities.

Make us want to stay, students say

Under a Thun Award Grant, 35 young people tell what it would take to make communities into places where they would want to live.

By Mike Urban

Reading Eagle

If Pennsylvania wants to hold onto its young people, it better start listening to them.

Otherwise, the state's high school and college graduates will continue moving to places more to their liking, according to Todd A. Vonderheid, director of strategy for the advocacy group Renew PA.

To help change that pattern, the Berks County Community Foundation on Thursday hosted a summit attended by students from a dozen Berks high schools and three colleges.

The session in the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts started with the 35 students hearing from several planning and development experts.

Then the students were asked what type of place they want to live in after graduation and talked about what the county and state should do to create such communities.

Their ideas will be passed on to local and state officials, who Vonderheid said he hopes will take the ideas seriously.

"We can't advocate growth in Pennsylvania and not heed the advice and desires of our young people," he said. "If we don't invest in our kids we will be a dying state."

Though the students represented all ends of the county, their ideas were pretty similar.

Most said Berks should preserve open space and historic architecture, foster locally owned businesses, develop lively downtowns, create good jobs, keep towns safe and develop efficient mass transportation systems.

Sovereign Center 5th Anniversary

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Many referred to West Reading's Penn Avenue business district as the ideal that other Berks municipalities should aim for a clean place where people can safely walk between locally owned entertainment venues, shops and restaurants.

The session was funded through the recent \$5,000 Thun Award Grant provided by David L. Thun of Lower Heidelberg Township.

Thun, who is involved with several organizations committed to improving Pennsylvania, said he wanted the students to learn about how they could better their communities and state, a lesson they don't often get in school.

"It's time we give the young people an opportunity to tell us something rather than just the adults," he said.

Among the speakers were Amy Liu of the Brookings Institute, who showed just how quickly Pennsylvania's young people are moving out of the state, and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Thomas Hylton of Pottstown, who issued his plea for comprehensive planning to save cities, towns and countryside.

Wyomissing High School senior Kate Berman knew little about municipal services before the session, but said afterward she had learned much about the importance of consolidating services and maybe even the municipalities themselves.

"We need to reform our local government systems to reduce waste and increase their effectiveness," she said.

Richard C. Mappin, the community foundation's vice president for grant making, said he hopes the summit inspires similar forums across Pennsylvania.

If that happens, Renew PA, which advocates for government policies to improve communities, would hold a statewide conference in which students could present the best of their ideas directly to state leaders.

Most of Thursday's participants said the session spurred them to want to become more vocal in their communities.

"We're happy that they are so enthusiastic," said Tammy Phillips, program officer of the community foundation. She said she hopes the participants will keep that momentum going.

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