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Happy Holidays



Youth Help Guide the Way to Gonzales Future

BY IRWIN SPEIZER

When California's medical marijuana issue reached the rural City of Gonzales, residents packed a public meeting to discuss the merits of allowing dispensaries and/or cultivation and processing. The emotionally charged debate was heated among the citizenry until Anthony Avila and Janelle Gill stepped to the microphone.

Suddenly, the room went silent in a show of respect for the two high school students.

"It was pretty cool having everyone get really quiet and listen, as opposed to when the adults spoke," Avila recalled. "I think they knew that it was something special to have the youth there talking about the issue."

Avila and Gill are not just two random teenagers who decided to speak up. They are the Gonzales Youth Commissioners, the two official student representatives to the Gonzales City Council and the Gonzales School Board, part of an ongoing partnership between the

Above: Anthony A. and Janelle G. during a meeting with the GYC & Superintendent Liz Modena.

city government and its schools that has helped advance a unique level of citizen engagement. The student representatives are part of a larger Gonzales Youth Council that includes members from middle school to high school that meets to discuss city issues and address those of most concern to the youth.

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The city prides itself on what it calls "The Gonzales Way," a descriptive meant to capture both the strong bonds between the city government and its citizenry and also the progressive, can-do policies that the city government strives to pursue on everything from economic development to school relations.

The Gonzales Way is evident not only in fostering youth leaders but also in the

regular joint meetings between the City Council and the Gonzales School Board. It is evident in green and sustainable policies that pervade both school projects and economic development efforts so that the schools have active recycling programs while the city develops solar and wind power projects, including the iconic wind turbine that looms over the city.

Situated in the heart of the agricultural Salinas Valley, Gonzales has its share of challenges from high poverty rates to a shortage of affordable housing. But within its region, Gonzales stands out for its lower crime rate, relatively higher educational achievement, and a string of economic development successes. In its own way, Gonzales presents a fresh and forward-looking image carefully managed with city policies and programs and a determined focus on schools and youth.

"Gonzales is a very special and unique place," says Gonzales Unified School District Superintendent Elizabeth Modena. "I knew that the minute I stepped in here. It has this sense of pride and connectedness, and that helps keep kids safe. Never once have I felt afraid in this community."

The focus on youth is partly a reflection of the relatively young population: 60 percent of city residents are below the age of 35. A big part of the push for economic development in Gonzales is to create future job opportunities for the city's youth.

Over the last few years, Gonzales, a city of fewer than 10,000, has managed to land a series of significant economic development



Current and incoming 2016-2017 Gonzales Youth Commissioners- Janelle G., Anthony A., Adilene R. and Cindy A.

projects, most tied to the prevailing agricultural economy of the region. The expanding business and industrial base has added about 1,200 jobs to Gonzales and fueled an increased need for housing. In October, the city council and planning commission held a joint workshop to hear from developers and landowners planning three major new developments with the potential to add more than 6,000 new housing units.

While the three proposed developments are still in relatively early stages, they all feature similar characteristics to meet city guidelines for livability and sustainability that encourage elements like pedestrian-friendly layouts and easy connections to other parts of the city. Each

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2015-16 Gonzales Youth Commissioners.

project includes a site for a new school.

Youth and schools are a central focus for Gonzales City Manager René Mendez, who made it a point to offer welcoming comments to teachers and staff at an orientation session at the start of the school year. When the idea of adding youth representation to the city council emerged from a youth forum a few years ago, Mendez put the city to work hammering out a way for it happen.

“You hear all the time that we have to get youth involved,” Mendez says. “We wanted to do something beyond tokenism that had a higher profile. So we gave students a permanent seat at the council table. They are considered part of the city structure and fabric.”

Yesenia Camacho was one of the students who led the drive to create the Youth Council and was one of the first two Youth Commissioners to the city council. She is now a second-year student at the University of California Santa Cruz and credits her experience on the council with boosting her confidence and commitment to community involvement.

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The power is limited, of course, since the student representatives don’t get to vote on council measures. But they do get to speak and inform action taken while also carrying out service projects to improve their city.

When the medical marijuana issue came up, the student council met separately and

found itself split on the issue. Some favored medical marijuana as a therapeutic remedy and a new business opportunity for the city. Others opposed it as a mixed message to the city’s youth, who were regularly urged to avoid drugs, including marijuana. When the public meeting arrived, one student from each side

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presented arguments. Avila and Gill introduced the speakers, noting the split among students on the issue.

The city council ended up splitting on the issue as well, deciding to allow limited cultivation but no dispensaries.

Avila, now a high school senior, says his experience as a youth representative to the city has given him valuable insights into how the world works that he thinks will serve him well as he pursues his college career.

“What would I be doing if I wasn’t at the city council?” he says. “I would probably be sitting at home playing video games or something. Instead, I am thinking about my community.” **ce**

