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Alameda County
Supervisor Keith Carson, Fifth District

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Press Release



Photo 1: Supervisor Carson addresses Mrs. Wolfe's AP Government class at Oakland Technical High School

Photo 2: Mrs. Wolfe (background) and her students listen to Carson describe the functions of county government

Photo 3: Supervisor Carson and intern Kamar O'Guinn speak with a student whose family member works for Alameda County

Oakland Youth Connect with Local Government Leaders

Supervisor Keith Carson visits Oakland Tech to engage high school students

On a recent Monday morning, Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson and three staff members stopped by the AP Government class of Oakland Tech veteran teacher Mary Ann Wolfe. A longtime advocate for youth voices and youth involvement in government, Mrs. Wolfe had just led over 70 students on a trip to our nation's capitol. After learning about the intricacies of the federal government, the class was curious to hear from Supervisor Carson about the role that local government plays in the everyday lives of Alameda County residents.

Supervisor Carson engaged the students by asking them what they wanted to be when they grow up. One young man declared that he wanted to be a doctor. "Well," said Carson, "the County appoints a Board of Trustees to run Highland Hospital and is also responsible for a number of clinics in the community." Students were interested to learn that Alameda County provides funding for school clinics like the one at McClymonds High School in West Oakland.

In response to a student who wants to travel abroad and work in international politics, Carson quipped: "You could be a diplomat and even go work with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton." He went on to describe a recent trade mission to China in which he and East Bay business leaders met with Chinese entrepreneurs and green

clean technology innovators to discuss partnerships and investment in the East Bay. He encouraged the youth to study business, especially emerging industries like green tech and renewable energy that are making the East Bay a “Green Corridor” enterprise zone.

A future student of social policy wanted to know whether she needed to beef up her math skills. Carson, who is chair of the Alameda County Budget Committee Workgroup, described the central role of statistics and numbers in decision-making about social and economic policies. In order to predict budget deficits and revenue shortfalls, “It goes back to the numbers issue,” Carson explained. Policy analysts examine trends in sales and property tax revenue, among other indicators, to determine how the county is faring during the recession. Carson’s Chief of Staff Rodney Brooks added that comparisons of census data help policymakers to determine how to allocate resources.

The young people asked some tough, thought-provoking questions. “Are there any areas of government that the federal government oversees,” one student wondered, “that you feel would be better carried out at the county level?” “All politics are local,” Supervisor Carson told the young lady, “and we can always use more communication between the different levels of government.” He encouraged the kind of joint collaboration that has led to Youth Ventures, an intergovernmental collective that is applying for President Obama’s Promise Neighborhoods initiative grant.

Supervisor Carson ended the visit by reminding the youth that they need to speak up and get involved if they want to see change in their communities. “No one represents you better than you,” he said. He encouraged youth to get involved and go to meetings and legislative hearings that deal with issues of concern to them.

He offered as an example the 2003 proposal to build a new juvenile hall in Alameda County. In the middle of a Sacramento meeting with representatives from the Department of Corrections, a group of youth suddenly burst into the meeting. Upset about the proposed increase from 299 to 540 beds in juvenile hall, the youth conveyed their concerns and shut the meeting down. Similar groups showed up at Board of Supervisors meetings and were successful in changing the minds of the adults in charge. Although the layout of the new building allows for a potential capacity of 540 beds, as a result of the young people’s actions, the County now operates the facility with a maximum capacity of 360 beds. The County has also implemented programs to keep the numbers of occupied beds even lower, usually between 230 and 270.

Supervisor Carson’s visit was a breath of fresh air, both for the youth and adults. Everyone was reminded that strong adult role models, such as teachers, youth workers and elected officials, can be crucial sources of inspiration and motivation as youth explore life’s options. And the adults in the room were reminded that youth are more perceptive and engaged than the mainstream media would have us believe. When given the chance and a little encouragement, they can be powerful partners in creating change in their communities.

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