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Schoharie students air ideas for bettering hometown

By R. J. Kelly, Daily Gazette

ALBANY — A dozen Schoharie High School seniors may not have all the answers to sustaining the rural community's economy and lifestyle, but they had plenty of ideas Wednesday.

"A lot of us won't be staying in Schoharie, but we should be making it better while we're here," student Beth Pitt said during a panel discussion to be aired in a couple of months on WAMC public radio.

In taping the one-hour broadcast for WAMC's Student Town Meetings series, the students made it clear they had doubts about the ability of Schoharie to attract much new industry, although several held out hope for wind power development to generate electricity and potentially offering income to farmers leasing land for windmills.

Several students expressed appreciation of Schoharie's rural beauty, but some wondered how they could make a living after they finish college.

"There's nothing in Schoharie for us to come back to ... the job growth has not increased," said Jeremy Lajeunesse, who plans to study graphic design.

Even so, several students suggested the town should concentrate on saving its core agricultural base.

"I don't see Schoharie being anything but a farm town," said Tyler Duma. "People are afraid of change. I don't think the residents want it [to change,]" he said.

The show gave Duma, who plans to pursue broadcast journalism, the chance to watch radio professionals work.

"It was a positive experience for me," Duma said after the session in WAMC's Linda Norris Auditorium. After some students noted small shops have trouble surviving against competition with Wal-Mart in Cobleskill, or the Albany County and Schenectady County retail malls, Pat Miller said: "it's up to the people of Schoharie to keep their businesses intact."

The students, representing a cross-section of teacher John Sorady's participation in government classes, engaged in a free-wheeling, 65-minute panel discussion that included Assemblyman Pete Lopez, R-Schoharie, and Schoharie town Supervisor Martin Shrederis.

Students during the past month researched the topic of challenges facing rural communities in the 21st century.

WAMC Education Director Maryanne Malecki helped students prepare.

“We need tourism,” Shrederis told the panel. “When I grew up you could buy anything on Main Street from a pair of socks to a new washer,” he said referring to the 1950s and ’60s.

Such retail and service offerings are fewer today in Schoharie, but the appeal of electricity-generating windmills drew support from Heidi Bendict.

“They’re beautiful because they’re saving the Earth,” she said.

“Windmills are going to be helping [save] agriculture and farming ... even though [people] may not have our perfect mountain views anymore,” added Lizzie Goblet.

That prompted an exchange over how “cool” wind turbines may look versus their impact on hilltop views.

“I like windmills ... but not in Schoharie County,” said Marcy Price.

“I like Schoharie County the way it is,” she said, adding she didn’t want to “look at all the windmills” when going hiking.

While suggesting people may someday grow used to seeing windmills on their rural landscapes, Shrederis also noted that a major focus of the 1997 town comprehensive plan that students had researched was to retain the town’s rural character.

“We wanted a picture-perfect Schoharie County,” Shrederis said of the village and town citizen committee that developed the plan.

The phrase is often used in tourism advertising, noted WAMC moderator David Guistina.

Among other student suggestions were developing more youth-oriented activities, finding ways to balance preservation of the agricultural economy and attraction of new industries, reducing duplication of businesses and government, encouraging tourism and improving planning.

To Lopez and Shrederis, the discussion was a familiar litany of topics local and regional officials have been wrestling with for years.

Still, both said afterward that the students’ insights were refreshing.

“It was a great forum That is how we can keep young people engaged in the community,” Lopez said. “It’s part of building citizenship,” he said.

“It’s wonderful to hear some of their ideas,” Shrederis said.

As a former farmer who grew up on his parents' 737-acre dairy on Rickard Hill Road, since sold and subdivided for housing, Shrederis said the answers to balancing economic development and farm preservation continues to elude local officials.

"Our biggest problem is that we can't get industry to come into Schoharie County and create jobs," he said.

When student Sigrid Kuntze noted that recent sidewalk improvements in the village might help bring in more tourists, Lopez said that "the sidewalk project took five years" to get funded and approved.

School officials in the audience, including district Superintendent Brian Sherman, high school Principal Stacey Adams, and teacher Sorady, were clearly pleased with the students' performance.

"Sometimes they feel they have no input and the radio show lets them have their opinions heard in the Capital District," Sorady said.

One long-running, divisive community issue — Cobleskill Stone Products' pending application to expand its limestone quarry at the edge of school's campus — did not surface during the taping, although Sorady said it had been discussed during student research.

"It's been around so long, we just don't notice it anymore," said student Cody Robinson-Bullock after the taping.

No date has been set, but the show is expected to air in late February on WAMC 90.3 FM as part of its twice-monthly series of similar programs with rural and inner-city school students.