

Young Adults Encouraged to Participate in Government

The Role of Citizens in the Legislative Process was the topic of a public forum at Hudson Hall on Wednesday, March 26. Forty-seven people heard the encouraging words of Representative Tom Hills who explained that citizens can and do influence the legislative process. He told the group that South Dakota has a citizen legislature and a small population. “When we have a legislature and as few citizens as we do, you can have an influence. I want to encourage you to use it. You can have a voice and your legislator will listen to you.” Representative Hills gave several personal examples of citizen influence.

Some of the difficulties participants saw in citizen participation in government processes were: feeling intimidated by public officials, being ill informed about issues and processes, and lack of caring unless personally affected. Comments also showed though that input may be more welcome than people think. One woman said she found that boards and commissions are thankful to have people show up and speak. A former office holder told how he has often testified at hearings, giving encouragement to those who may be intimidated by the opportunity.

According to questionnaires completed after the forum, over 90% of the participants felt they received good information about the legislative process. After several references to crackerbarrels, one young man asked what a crackerbarrel is. Forum participants explained, making him and others informed about one way legislators engage the public and how citizens can interact with them.

Diversity in the ages of the forum participants enhanced the discussion and overall, many students felt encouraged to hear that adults in their community care about what they think. They were told that they need to be involved, that they will be leaders one day.

Spearfish high school students took the words of Representative Hills and the forum participants to heart with comments on questionnaires, completed after the forum, such as “Our opinion mattered,” and: What I liked about the forum was “learning that me, as a young individual, matters.”

South Dakota Issues Forums processes provide attendees the opportunity to voice their opinions and to think about the pros and cons of different actions. Not a panel of experts or a listening-only meeting, the forum was an “open discussion, anyone could add information or ask questions” reported one student.

A big thank you goes to the Spearfish residents, Representative Tom Hills, and Spearfish High School government and social studies teachers who provided the opportunity and/or gave encouragement to the young people at the forum. As one student put it, “It changed my outlook because they said they do care and that influences teens.”

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March 28, 2008

