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Bosnian students get firsthand look at how government works in U.S.

18 YOUTHS STOP IN WEST CHESTER ON THEIR WAY FROM D.C. TO NEW YORK
By ANNE PICKERING, Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER — A group of Bosnian students touring the borough to learn how American government functions at the local level had some tough questions for area elected officials.

During two hours of presentations at Borough Hall Thursday, students asked why the United States didn't sign the Kyoto Protocol, the international agreement signed by industrialized nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and why if nobody liked President Bush we didn't get rid of him.

Put on the spot, Councilwoman Carolyn Comitta said that while the American people would like the government to take more action to combat global warming, the federal government's response was lagging. But the borough had taken action by passing a groundbreaking ordinance requiring developers building above 45 feet in the downtown area to follow Energy Star guidelines for building energy-efficient buildings.

The 18 Bosnian students and three teachers are on a 30-day trip to the United States through the Delaware 4H Bosnia Youth Leadership Program sponsored by the U.S. State Department.

Program coordinator Mark Manno, the state 4H extension educator of the University of Delaware, said the high school students were selected by the U.S. Embassy through a very competitive program. Six students from each of the three ethnicities, Croatians, Serbs and Muslims, were chosen to participate in the program that teaches citizenship, leadership and democracy. The students have visited Washington, D.C., Baltimore and are planning a trip to New York City. They have had workshops on the American political process, the Electoral College and the Constitution. When they return to Bosnia-Herzegovina, each group of six students will design and execute a community service project.

At Borough Hall, Mayor Dick Yoder presented each student with a miniature key to the city lapel pin after discussing the role of the mayor in local government.

State Sen. Andrew Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland, stressed the value of being involved in the political process. He said while voting rates in the United States are historically low, "it is the active minority that gets things done."

It was a message that resonated with the young people.

Ivana Bagaric, 17, of Tomislavgrad, praised the program. "It's teaching us to be active in our community and not to just wait for other people to make decisions."

The students said that before the trip, their knowledge of America was based on what they learned from American movies and TV sitcoms such as "Will and Grace," "Sex and the City," "Desperate Housewives," and "Everybody Loves Raymond."

From the movies, it looked like everything here is very fast-paced, they said. But living with their host families, they found more similarities than differences, although Aleksandar Dragicevic, 17, of Banja Luka, said he is amazed that members of his host family get up every morning at 6 a.m., even on Sunday.

One of the objectives of the program, said Manno, is to show how people of different backgrounds and races get along in a civil society.

Bosnia-Herzegovina was the center of a bloody civil war from 1991 to 1995 that saw more than 200,000 people killed through ethnic cleansing.

But being from different ethnic backgrounds did not seem to be on the mind of these students.

"Nationalism is a big issue between older people," said Jasmin Omerdic, 16, of Tuzla, "but not the youth."

"Our group is a great example. We all get along," said Dragicevic. "We have to be friends if we want to get anything done."

"The war destroyed every industry," said Bagaric. "A lot of people are waking up, particularly the youth, and want to be active and make a change. Everyone is tired of fights and arguments."

"Twelve years ago when the war ended, the politicians didn't do anything to make life better for ordinary people," said Omerdic. While finding opportunities to work in Bosnia-Herzegovina is not easy, there are many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that are helping.