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Who's minding the metro area? An Oak Lawn teen, for one

BY STEVE METSCH

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An Oak Lawn teenager is busy these days thinking about the big picture and the future for the Chicago metropolitan area.

Sarah Dynia, 16, a junior at Mother McAuley High School in Chicago's Mount Greenwood community, is part of a panel of high school students put together by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

The group of 25 meets once a month at Willis Tower in downtown Chicago.

"It's a lot about economic development, sustainable environmental development, basically just trying to make the area of northern Illinois a better place to live," Sarah said during an interview at her kitchen table.

"Right now, with the current statistics, a lot of negative things are showing. There's going to be tons of problems and we're trying to organize plans so that in 2040 we'll have more than enough clean water, healthy food and better transportation, a better quality of life for everyone," she said.

Sarah got involved in the program after learning of it from Oak Lawn Mayor Sandra Bury. That and taking part in a future leaders of science and technology program at Illinois Institute of Technology over the summer sparked her interest.

"It gave me an introduction to the whole idea of environmental engineering, and the things we're doing to our environment, and how we can fix them. I saw the opportunity and I thought, 'This is a good thing to look into,' " she said.

She applied and was accepted.

"The application asked what we saw as the biggest problem and how we would fix it. I wrote a lot about the environment. We're going to figure it out. Saving our water, saving our land, not overbuilding," she said.

Oak Lawn is fortunate, she said, because of the many parks around the village.

"We're really lucky here in Oak Lawn because there are a lot of parks, fields to play on," she said. "I'm lucky, but if you go farther into the city, there are fewer parks and some people are scared to go to their parks."

Is a career in village planning in the offing?

“I want to do something to help out everybody. I’ve had a big interest in medicine. I’m getting into engineering as well. I’m hoping there’s a way I can combine things somehow,” she said.

Her parents, Mark and Laura, are understandably proud of their only child.

“She’s amazing. She’s my hero,” Mark Dynia said.

Sarah said she learned about green architecture when she was in the program at IIT from a teacher “who happened to be an environmental engineer.

“Conserving water is really important,” she said. “It’s kind of bad there are so many people who are ignorant about it. They don’t see anything wrong with leaving their faucet on and walking away, or leaving all their electronics on. They’re wasting so much.”

She’s busy with school at Mother McAuley with four advanced placement classes. But she doesn’t mind the extra duty of serving on the panel.

“I’m excited to go to the meetings,” she said.

In May, the panel will deliver its final presentation regarding future plans for the Chicago metropolitan area.

She also is in charge of Stuffed Love, which she started three years ago as a way to deliver hand-stitched, heart-shaped pillows to children who are heart patients at five area hospitals. She’s won several awards for the effort.

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