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Athens students receive grant to utilize their voices and invest in city

High school students are utilizing their voices to share ideas and invest money in Athens.

Dekko Foundation recently announced a \$2,000 grant for the Athens Mayor's Youth Commission to support "Student Voices," a project designed to enhance knowledge of community needs, volunteering and community service. The funds will support the students' new podcast named "All In With Athens" and the group's annual community grant program.

The grant will fund \$700 for marketing and other expenses for the podcast and \$1,300 for the students to administer small grants to non-profits that have a project that will benefit Athens.

The Athens Mayor's Youth Commission is comprised of sophomores, juniors and seniors from Athens High, Athens Bible and Lindsay Lane Christian Academy schools. They learn about local government's role and their role to be engaged and informed citizens. They meet monthly, attend City Council and school board meetings and participate in community service projects.

This spring, Youth Commissioners will accept proposals from non-profits for Athens-based projects and will debate and discuss which projects to fund. In past years the students have supported equipment for Athens-Limestone Hospital, Athens Main Street downtown improvements, teen programs at the Family Resource Center, educational programs at Learn-to-Read and enhancements at the Pincham-Lincoln Center on the historic Trinity/Fort Henderson site.

In addition, Youth Commissioners volunteered with some of these groups. For example, Youth Commissioners provided a grant and volunteered at the Family Resource Center's teen Christmas program that celebrates teens who have completed courses on issues such as bullying.

Tina Cook, executive director of the Family Resource Center, said, "They (Youth Commissioners) are in training to make those wise, leadership choices that will impact us all. I am honored to be part of that process for them."

The Youth Commissioners plan to make a call out for community grant proposals in March.

As for the podcast, two Youth Commissioners a month work with mentor Jerome Malone to record an episode.

"The podcast started this school year when we challenged the students to name it, create the topics and conduct the discussion," said mentor Holly Hollman. "They have discussed issues ranging from community service to economic development to student leadership."

The Athens-Limestone Public Library is hosting the "All In With Athens" podcasts on its platforms such as Spotify and Google Podcasts. The Youth Commissioners are brainstorming about ways to use grant funds to market it.

"If we will get out of students' way, they'll amaze us with what they can accomplish," Athens Mayor Ronnie Marks said. "We give them support and opportunities to speak their minds, and then we stand back and see what they can do."

In a letter to the Mayor's Office, Dekko Foundation said, "As we reviewed your proposal, it was evident that you believe in young people and the impact they can make on society. Thank you for your commitment to growing and developing strong leaders in your community."

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The Dekko Foundation was created by the late businessman and philanthropist Mr. Chester E. Dekko in 1981 in Kendallville, Ind. Its mission is fostering economic freedom through education in communities where Dekko had business or personal interests, including the City of Athens and Limestone County. The foundation invests in organizations that support children and young people from birth through age 18 in building knowledge, skills and character so they can be self-sufficient and capable of achieving economic freedom as adults. For more information about the foundation, go to dekkofoundation.org.