



# **Alton's youth bringing concerns to mayoral candidates at upcoming Saturday forum**

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**ALTON** - Alton youths demand specifics from candidates running for mayor.

Greg Gelzinnis, who is working with the Alton YWCA and Ben Golly for the [Alton Youth Engagement Program \(YEP\)](#), said questions being submitted to the four mayoral

candidates by area students reflect that demand for specifics. YEP is hosting a candidate forum on Saturday, March 18, 2017, at the Alton YWCA, located at 304 E. Third Street, starting at 2 p.m. The forum will be moderated by Alton High School senior and National Honors Society President Marissa Whiteside. Questions for [Scott Dixon](#), [Dan Rauschkolb](#), [Joshua Young](#) and current [Alton Mayor Brant Walker](#) were submitted to each before the forum.

"The candidates were given the questions in advance to prepare to answer them," Gelzinnis said. "We want to see how they can perform with preparation and not just off-the-cuff."

Questions being submitted have been very eye-opening to Gelzinnis, he said. Some of the topics important to the students submitting the questions include how each candidate will support the youth.

"Candidates say youth are important," Gelzinnis said. "The students are asking how they've proved that. Does that mean positions for youth voices within the city cabinet or administration? Does that mean the city will turn to youth regularly and routinely to ask about their concerns?"

Mostly, Gelzinnis said, the young people want the candidates to give specifics for what they plan on doing as well as what they've done to prove that. He said they also wanted specifics for what each candidate intended to do in regards of getting new businesses to the community.

"They are worried about businesses closing, like in the Alton Square Mall," he said. "They're asking what is really being done to attract business, to ensure there is a place for them to come back to and raise families with the expectation of reasonable living wages and a reasonable outlook for the future."

A one percent sales tax referendum currently set to be on the April 4, 2017, ballot across Madison County is also important to the students, Gelzinnis said. He said students asked the candidates about their positions, due to the importance to their school districts for it to pass.

During the forum, the four men will be given four minutes each to introduce themselves and their campaigns. They will then be given the chance to answer each question with three minutes of time in a rotating order.

"I think it will be very enlightening," Gelzinnis said. "I'm really encouraged. The students have done a great job planning. Questions are spot-on for them and are regarding issues important to them."

Besides bringing questions to the candidates, Gelzinnis said students are becoming educated through this process - not just in democracy and the position of mayors, but also in voting itself. He said students who are going to be 18 by this coming election are learning they can register to vote the day of the election and vote directly following registration. He said the American government teachers in the Alton School District have been very supportive of the students in their efforts to put together this forum, with some even offering "extra credit" for students to attend.

Invitations have been sent to Marquette Catholic High School, Alton High School and Mississippi Valley Christian Academy for students to attend, but Gelzinnis emphasized the forum is open to the public and everyone is encouraged to attend.

The YEP student forum will be the fourth public forum held with all four men running for the position of Alton mayor. Forums have also been hosted by the [Community Awareness Panel](#) and the [East End Improvement Association](#). A forum hosted by Alton Main Street will be hosted at the Riverbender.com Community Center on Wednesday, March 15, 2017, at 7 p.m.

YEP was founded by the Alton Corps of the Salvation Army and the YWCA with help from Ben Golly of Today's Beauty Supply, located at 1415 Central Ave. Golly created Today's Place, a youth center adjacent to Today's Beauty Supply. Multiple poetry slams have taken place at Today's Place with the help of YEP with an additional poetry slam planned for March 25, 2017.



Gelzinnis said YEP was conceived following a [Youth Speak Out Event](#) at the Riverbender.com Community Center in which Gelzinnis said he heard from students complaints regarding a lack of a place for them to "hang out." He said many students did not feel welcomed at faith communities offering after school activities if they did not belong to the churches.

After that event, Gelzinnis said he wanted to use a part of the Alton Salvation Corps, which he said had previous been "underutilized" - the basement. He said, after several meetings with community leaders as well as student peer leaders, YEP began in January 2017 with an improv performance in that basement.

"We have a group of students to come up with ideas, marketing and managing those ideas," he said. "It's really giving them a voice. I feel very proudly and confident it happened and is continuing."