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Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

School's grads may each get \$4,000

A group wants to provide postsecondary funding to South Portland High alumni.

By WILLA PLANK Staff Writer

August 10, 2007

A community group began an effort this week to provide every South Portland High School graduate with a \$2,000 scholarship for each of the first two years of postsecondary education.

The first step for the South Portland Project Scholarship committee is to raise \$20,000 to get the program started.

Over time, the group hopes to raise enough money to provide two-year scholarships, regardless of academic achievement or economic need, to every graduating senior who continues their education.

Members of the scholarship committee provided no details about the amount of money they hope to raise or when they expect to achieve their goal.

Similar groups have set up educational funds across Maine in recent years, but the size of the South Portland project makes it stand out, said Jim Geary, vice president for finance at the Maine Community Foundation, which would help manage the scholarship fund.

Geary said, "It's an attainable goal over a period of time."

A study released in July by the Sen. George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute showed the important role that money plays in a Maine family's decisions about higher education.

Nearly two-thirds of parents say finances will likely determine which college their child attends, and about one-third of parents said finances will likely determine whether their child attends college at all.

The study also showed that while the percentage of Maine high school graduates who intend to enroll in college has increased, the number of those who actually enroll after a year has gone down.

The \$2,000 scholarship for each of two years of postsecondary education could have great impact regardless of where the student is headed.

Attending a school in the Maine Community College System costs \$2,400 for a full-time student taking 30 credit hours a year.

Attending the University of Maine costs an in-state student \$15,814 a year, including tuition, fees, room and board.

Robert Pecchia, associate dean of admissions at the University of New England, said any size scholarship makes a difference, even at his school, where tuition, room and board costs \$35,190 a year.

"It might (determine) what school they go to," Pecchia said.

At a City Council meeting on Monday, councilors backed the project with a proclamation declaring September "South Portland Project Scholarship Month."

Ralph Cabana, a committee member, said the high school already works to encourage students to continue their educations.

Each year, sophomores are shown three schools -- a public university, a private institution and a community college -- to inspire them to pursue postsecondary education.

"We show the kids the colleges, we help them with the admission process, and this (scholarship project) just seems like the natural next step," Cabana said.

About 85 percent of this year's South Portland graduates went on to postsecondary education, he said.

Jane Harmon, another committee member, said the scholarships would be significant to students.

"Some kids don't think they have the option" of going to college, Harmon said. "Two thousand dollars is a lot of money to a lot of people."

Jeanne Crocker, a member of the committee and principal of South Portland High School, said about half of this year's 225 graduates received scholarships separate from financial aid packages awarded by postsecondary institutions.

Crocker said the panel wants to provide money to all graduates because it is hard to determine who needs it the most.

"Any family can benefit from the \$2,000 to apply to room and board, transportation," Crocker said.

The committee will be looking to individuals, including alumni, and to foundations and businesses for support.

On a much smaller scale, a residents group in Deer Isle has raised funds for educational enrichment programs as part of the Island Education Foundation. Sebert Brewer, a founding member, said the group has at least \$300,000 and started 14 years ago with \$17,000.

"The key is to start and make certain that it is a very long-range project," Brewer said. "You need to start small and grow into these shoes."

Staff Writer Willa Plank can be contacted at 791-6326 or at:

wplank@pressherald.com

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