



Big bucks eyed for college-bound kids

By Randy Billings (published: August 23, 2007)
City launches Project Scholarship

SOUTH PORTLAND – A group of residents is teaching high school seniors to think big – and they're leading by example.

Project Scholarship, a community-based initiative to give students of all academic abilities financial assistance for post secondary school, is trying to raise \$20,000 in September. The seed money will be used to launch a partnership with the Maine Community Foundation to give every student seeking a two- or four-year degree \$2,000 in each of their first two years of college.

To kick-start the initiative, the City Council passed a resolution last week, proclaiming September as South Portland Project Scholarship Month.

"I think this is just an incredible goal," Councilor Linda Boudreau said.

Project Scholarship volunteer committee member Ralph Cabana said the financial assistance is needed since there is a growing number of students interested in pursuing a higher education, but only a limited number are eligible for scholarships. Cabana, a school volunteer for the last 16 years, said scholarship foundations are currently facing an increase in applications for a shrinking pool of resources.

"This committee was formed to reverse this trend," Cabana said.

Out of last year's graduating class, 85 percent went on to pursue a higher education, he said. Out of those 188 students, however, only 100 received scholarships.

"(Project Scholarship) is truly for everyone," Cabana said. "We would like to award every student with a scholarship who applies for one." Students could receive scholarships – on a smaller scale – as early as this school year, he said.

Cabana said, once the \$20,000 benchmark is achieved, the Maine Community Foundation will take over the financial management for the group. MCF will invest the funds and take the lead role in fundraising.

"Basically, we have the idea and we turn it over to them," he said. Cabana hopes to roll all of the scholarships offered at the high school into the program, while retaining the names of each.

According to SPHS Director of Guidance Linda Sturm, the

Project Scholarship initiative is a continuation of a growing effort to open the door to higher education for high school students.

Sturm said the school already receives a MELMAC grant, which sponsors visits to college campuses for sophomores. Additionally, the school is part of the Early College for ME program, which offers scholarship and mentoring for students attending community college, she said.

Carmita McCoy, who helps coordinate the college trips for the high school, extolled the value and success of the city's emphasis on post-secondary education at the Aug. 6 council meeting.

"It's been a pleasure to help coordinate this event and it's mind-boggling to find out the enjoyment the students have experienced." McCoy, the mother of an in-coming senior, said. She predicted the scholarship initiative would increase the number of students seeking a higher education.

Volunteer committee member Jane Harmon said the group will ultimately need to raise and manage millions of dollars to achieve its goal, which she expects could take five years or longer.

"It's not daunting because we're not letting it be daunting," Harmon said. "It's not going to happen overnight."

The committee does hope to be able to provide this year's graduating class with some financial assistance, she said, which will ultimately depend on the success of this year's fundraising.

Harmon said the group is currently working trying to secure the support of several corporate donors who have already expressed interest in the project. The group will also launch an alumni campaign, she said.

"It's something that is perceived by some people to be setting the tone for the rest of the state," she said.

The project not only seeks to offer financial assistance to aspiring college students, but it teaches them a lesson in the process.

"Goals need to be lofty," Cabana said. "We're hoping to show the students that they too should stretch and strive."

Randy Billings can be reached at 781-3661 ext. 100 or rbillings@theforecaster.net.