

With Teen Council, City of Gulfport Gives Young Residents a Say in Local Government

by Gail Biron

The City of Gulfport is located south of St. Petersburg along the beautiful shores of Boca Ciega Bay. Beach Boulevard South is lined with grand old oak trees, local art galleries, quirky Key West-type shops and fabulous eateries, and it leads to the historic Gulfport Casino Ballroom on the waterfront. Many people may not know it, but there is a very active youth group in the city, the Gulfport Teen Council, which serves as a link between the city's teenage population and city officials.

According to Mayor Michael Yakes, a longtime resident of the city, Gulfport's population is getting younger. Many years ago, teens had no place to go to have fun, so they just congregated on the outside steps of the casino.

During the discussion of renovation and expansion of the recreation center in 1998, Yakes and several other Gulfport residents talked about how the young people could get involved by brainstorming and making recommendations for improvements to the recreation center. After all, even though the center is used by many, a majority of the attendees are children and teens.

The Gulfport City Council adopted Resolution No. 98-93 in 1998 to create the Gulfport Teen Council. The Teen Council originally had eight members, who were selected from local high schools based on recommendations from their principals. The members were required to be Gulfport residents and be between 13 and 19 years of age. Each applicant had to submit an application and a recommendation/reference letter to the City Council in order to be considered.

In February 2000, the Gulfport Teen Council made a recommendation to the City Council to eliminate the



The Teen Council participates in a landscape beautification clean-up project in Gulfport.

addition of bleachers and office space for the second phase of the recreation renovation project, which would save the city \$10,000; the City Council accepted this change. Other design ideas, such as redesigning the existing skate park into a basketball court and installing a new skate park in a more central location of the city, also came from the Teen Council.

In June 2001, the City Council passed Resolution 2001-68, which established the Gulfport Teen Council as a city standing committee and highlighted the following designated duties for it:

- To recommend equipment needs and budgetary considerations for city parks and recreation programs.
- To provide suggestions and assistance with youth events for city-sponsored festivals and programs.
- To organize and perform projects that would benefit the Gulfport community.
- To serve as an advisory board on issues related to young people that the City Council wished to delegate for consideration to the Teen Council.

The Teen Council currently consists of seven regular members and two alternates who are between 13 and 19 years of age. When there are vacancies on the council, a notice is published in the local paper. Interested teens submit an application along with a recommendation/reference letter to the City Council to be considered.

With the support of the mayor and the City Council, the Gulfport Teen Council has been allowed to travel to many



Members of the Gulfport Teen Council attend the Florida League of Cities Annual Conference in Orlando. Pictured left to right: Advisor Marivel Gutierrez, Laura Fritz, Joseph Reed, Mayor Mike Yakes, chaperone Richard Cottrell, Sarah McAvoy, Darcy Reed and Councilman Bob Worthington.