

Nearly 200 area youths gather for town hall

[BY SARAH WOMER @YSSarahWomer](#)

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More than 170 high school and college students gathered at Yuma City Hall on Wednesday to discuss civic leadership with other young adults from around the state via a live video feed.

The group of Yuma students, which represented the largest number of town hall participants in the state, connected with the Arizona Students' Association, Arizona Town Hall and the Maricopa Community Colleges to discuss how they can make a difference in their communities and beyond.

The "Arizona Youth Town Hall on Civic Leadership for Arizona's Future" was hosted by the Southwest Arizona Futures Forum and

Arizona Town Hall to allow youth the opportunity to share their opinions on solutions to change Arizona for the better.

"We believe, as the Southwest Arizona Futures Forum, the key word in our name is 'futures' and we believe that we needed to hear the voice of the students," said Shelley Mellon, SAFF chair. "Arizona Town Hall approached us and they had the same aspirations as we did so we partnered together to be able to draw students from the state and allow them to begin communicating and start discussing topics that are vital to our state and our local communities."

Students had the opportunity to hear an opening speaker panel, break up into student-led small groups to discuss questions and then join back together and share reports from each group. Discussions consisted of questions about how students can play a role in their community, how a person's background may affect them and how social media can play a role in leadership - just to name a few.

Kofa High School senior Priscila Ortiz, 17, was a discussion facilitator in a small group and said that she felt the event was a very valuable experience for her.

"I get nervous when I do any public speaking so by putting myself in places where I'm forced to speak up, it really helps me and it's really going to help me in the future," she said.

Ortiz, who is also involved in the Junior Statesmen of America club on her campus, said that she enjoys economics and hopes to be involved in policy making in the future.

"I feel that if you want to change something you really have to do it yourself sometimes because if you don't do it, most likely someone else isn't going to either."

Fellow classmate and JSA member Yesinia Yopez, 17, said that she is grateful for the opportunity to participate in an event like this.

"(Adults) have to go out of their way to get us involved in these things and it's cool that our voices are being heard because a lot of times we feel like the adults get to make all the decisions. It's really cool that they're

reaching out to us. It's also preparation for the real world," she said.

Yepez said that she wants to eventually become a governor and later a diplomat or an ambassador.

"We all need a basis or a foundation and I think this builds a really great foundation for us. What better way to start than with our small community and then we can hopefully give back and help other kids get involved."

Gila Ridge senior Rafael Martinez, 17, said that the main reason he wanted to attend the event was to learn more about how to be a leader.

"I come from an immigrant family... and so I want to make a difference in my life and take initiative and show I can do it," he said. "...I want to help make programs to help others that are in need like me."

The final report from the town hall will be shared with state leaders and lawmakers at the adult Arizona Town Hall forum in November. The final report from the youth session in Yuma will be available on SAFF's website www.safuturesforum.org by Friday Oct. 26 for the community to view.

Sarah Womer can be reached at swomer@yumasun.com or 539-6858.