

Welcome to kid-run Renway

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By Emily Garland

There's a new city in South King County, and all its citizens are under 18.

"It's a kid-run city," Meg Pitman explains.

Pitman is executive director of the Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club. But she's no longer the only executive at the club. Last fall, the kids took over, turning the club into a city and naming it Renway, short for Renton/Skyway.

The transformation from club to city is part of the club's transition into a MicroSociety, or a miniature society run by kids. The club's kids and adults receive guidance from The MicroSociety® Program, a nonprofit based in Philadelphia.

Renway has 13 businesses, plus government agencies, nonprofits and elected leaders.

The city is a democracy, and its citizens elected two presidents on Nov. 3, the same day as the U.S. presidential election.

Logan Hoggard, 12, is president of Renway's elementary room and Hunter Eider, 13, is president of the teen room.

Eider likes to say that he, not Barack Obama, is the country's first African-American president. Eider was voted into office half an hour before Obama.

New Renway presidents will be elected in September. Until

then, Hoggard and Eider are enjoying their tenure. The pair presided over a recent public unveiling of their city and presented a key to Renway to Renton mayor Denis Law.



Mayor Denis Law, at right, accepts the key to Renway, the new kid-run city operating out of the Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club. At far left is Hunter Eider, 13, president of the teen room, and at right is Logan Hoggard, 12, president of the elementary room.
Emily Garland/Renton Reporter

At the ceremony, Law congratulated Renway's citizens on the creation of their city and told the kids they would be entering the business world with a "whole lot more knowledge than we had."

Increasing the business and real-world knowledge of the club's members is a major goal of Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club's MicroSociety program. Another goal of the program is ending generational poverty, which is the focus of Renway's primary funder: the Renton-based BuRSST for Prosperity. (BuRSST stands for the five cities in which the nonprofit seeks to generate prosperity for low-income residents: Burien, Renton, SeaTac, Skyway and Tukwila.)

BuRSST is paying \$24,000 a year for three years for the training and curriculum for the Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club's MicroSociety program.

It was BuRSST and Bill Taylor, president and CEO of the Renton Chamber of Commerce, who suggested Pitman turn her club into a MicroSociety.

This suggestion came after Taylor visited the MicroSociety at Talbot Hill Elementary School during the chamber's business exchange program.

"It just absolutely blew me away what it does for kids," Taylor said.

What MicroSociety does, Taylor says, is empower kids to become business leaders and to burst from the confines of generational poverty.

Taylor says the MicroSociety at the Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club is going "exceptionally well," and "working exactly the way it was intended to work."

“What I see is kids who go through that program are going to be our future employees and our future entrepreneurs,” Taylor says. “And they have a much better chance of making it than their peers.”

The MicroSociety Program should be in every grade school in Washington, Taylor says.

It’s not yet. Talbot Hill and the Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club are the only facilities running the program in the state.

The Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club is blazing the trail on MicroSocieties in an after-school setting. Pitman has already received calls from other Boys & Girls clubs eager to develop their own MicroSocieties.

“We’re having a great time with it, and we’re hopeful we’ll be a national model for a MicroSociety after-school program,” Pitman says.

Renway’s 70-some residents are having a great time with it, too.

The city was in full swing during the recent community unveiling, officially called the marketplace inauguration.

The Bank of Renway was granting loans, AC2 (Arts & Cool Crafts) was hawking paper plate frisbees, wooden butterflies and cheerleader cutouts, the Healthy Lifestyles & Relaxation Station was pampering customers with foot and back massages, and a tech crew was using Wii Fit to conduct physicals.

Deshawna Sanders snapped photos of the night’s activities for Renway Spectacles, Renway’s local paper.

When she’s older, Sanders, 13, says she wants to work for a newspaper or be a doctor of literature.

The marketplace inauguration was so highly attended that the Bank of Renway had to run an emergency print of the city’s brightly colored money.

Renton/Skyway Boys & Girls Club is at 12400 80th Ave. S. in Seattle. The phone number is 206-436-1920. For more information about the club, visit www.positiveplace.org. For more information about the MicroSociety® Program, visit www.microsociety.org.

That emergency print was just one of the many real-world solutions Renway’s citizens have developed to keep their city running smoothly.

After Renway’s government forgot to pay the city’s businesses one week, Renway officials distributed a stimulus package — the same week President Obama distributed his stimulus package.

Renway has also already experienced its first wave of unemployment — which ended after the revolting workers realized no paycheck meant no field trip and no special snack.

As Pitman says, “Learning happens when things go off track.”

Pitman was initially skeptical of the benefits of MicroSociety. She’s now a devotee.

“It’s been a profound change for the club, and a huge shift for the staff, but the payoff has been amazing,” she says.

One element of the payoff is fewer club members with behavior problems.

Next school year, Pitman will begin working with teachers at the nearby Dimmitt Middle School, to determine how MicroSociety affects the academic progress of club members.

Pitman also hopes to add new club members next school year, including more Talbot Hill students, who are already familiar with MicroSociety.

Attracting more kids to what Pitman calls the “entrepreneurial playground” of Renway shouldn’t be difficult.

Many club parents tell Pitman they used to feel like they were discarding their kids at daycare when they drop them at the club.

Now, parents tell Pitman their kids don’t want to leave the club.

“When I pick them up, they don’t want to come home, and I want to stay here too,” parents tell her.