

DRAFTING YOUTH . . . FOR SERVICE

By **BEN WAXMAN**

THE BIGGEST myth about young people today is that we're apathetic. In reality, my generation is engaged and believes in the value of service. If the next mayor is smart, he'll marshal that positive energy to make Philadelphia a better place.

A recent study from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement indicates that 23 percent of those aged 15 to 25 had volunteered at some point in the past year. This was the highest percentage of any age group.

Clearly, young people today have a desire to serve. Philadelphia should encourage this trend and make our city a hotspot for people looking to give back.

Philadelphia needs a marketing campaign for do-gooders.

There are literally hundreds of thousands of young people across the country who decide to enter some kind of long-term public service every year.

Groups like Teach for America and AmeriCorps place young people into service programs across the country. We should try to attract these people to Philadelphia and put them to work.

There are countless non-profits, social-service agencies and other organizations that could benefit from an influx of idealistic young people. Already, there are several programs that place college graduates with community groups. One such organization, Philly Fellows, provides young people with housing, a stipend and other types of support.

What Philadelphia needs is a program like this on a mass scale. We can literally muster an army of workers to tackle the many problems faced by our city.

Of course, we shouldn't necessarily be spending money to attract idealistic young people when so many of our own are trapped in crumbling schools.

Philadelphia needs to spend tax dollars to make sure that ordinary citizens have affordable housing before subsidizing idealistic kids from other zip codes. That's where the mayor comes in.

It should be possible to organize such a program while spending very little in tax dollars.

THE MAYOR could use his bully pulpit to encourage cooperation between foundations, non-

profits, educational institutions and other partners.

He could call upon all the donors who gave money to political candidates in the last cycle to open their wallets one more time. Heck, Tom Knox might just want to fund the whole thing out of his own pocket.

This would also be a great moment for the business community to step up the plate. Companies could contribute to this type of program in a variety of ways.

Developers could donate units for subsidized housing. Restaurants, coffee shops and other retail outlets could offer discounts to young people enrolled in the program. Tech firms could offer to design and host a website with a comprehensive service database. The possibilities are endless.

In the last election, Philadelphia signaled that we are ready for change. Far too many people are cynical about the ability of government to create positive change. I believe that we can work together to make our region a better place to live and that young people can be an important part of this equation. *

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