

LONG ISLAND / SUFFOLK

Islip Town selects first teen to sit on environmental council

A Sayville High School senior, who has lobbied the town to implement more eco-friendly measures, says he can be "a voice of youth and inspiration."



Harrison Bench, 17, seen on Aug. 23, works as a town lifeguard and was appointed to the Islip Town Environmental Council. Photo Credit: Daniel Goodrich

By Rachelle Blidner

rachelle.blidner@newsday.com  @rachelleblidner

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Harrison Bench is on a mission to preserve the planet while juggling homework, college applications and more than a dozen extracurriculars.

Bench, 17, of Sayville, was appointed on Aug. 21 to serve on the Islip Town Environmental Council, which advises town officials on green matters, from improving water quality to cutting emissions.

He is the only teen in the council's current ranks — and possibly the first teen appointed in the group's 46-year history.

“I hope with a student on their board, I can be a voice of change, a voice of youth and inspiration,” Bench said. “It probably sounds so superficial adding a kid to the council, but this kid cares. This kid has passion.”

The Sayville High School senior has been lobbying the town board to implement more eco-friendly measures for the past year and a half with other members of the Suffolk Student Climate Action Committee's Sayville chapter. He has been attending monthly environmental council meetings since April.

Bench, whose resume is already five pages long, has met with officials such as Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and former Vice President Al Gore through his environmental advocacy.

He said his first priority is to get town officials to commit to using only renewable energy by 2030. He said he also wants officials to designate a staffer for environmental efforts and create a separate committee on addressing climate change.

Bench said he was added to the council after Town Supervisor Angie Carpenter reached out to his student

environmental group seeking to include a representative. The other members chose Bench, the chapter's president who helped found the group. It helped that he has his own car to get to meetings, he added.

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“Harrison Bench has a demonstrated track record of commitment to the environment and sustainability,” Carpenter said in a statement. “We are looking forward to working with him and sharing ideas.”

Melissa Parrott, the Sayville student group's founder and director, acknowledged the town's support and said she hopes Bench's role is not "a token position."

"The students mean business," said Parrott, who also works as the education and outreach coordinator for the Central Pine Barrens Commission. "They will fight for change."

Bench said he hopes to inspire more students to get involved in caring for the planet's health and get engaged in civic life, noting that most kids his age don't know who the town officials are.

He is not the only minor advising town officials, however. Ten teens currently serve on the town's Youth Bureau Board, which assists in the formation and implementation of youth services, spokeswoman Caroline Smith said.

Bench will have to balance his new role with the scores of extracurriculars he is involved in: He is secretary of his school's student body and National Honor Society, vice president of the Science National Honor Society and publicist for the high school's class of 2019, according to his resume. He is also a town lifeguard in the summer and a water instructor at the Patchogue YMCA during the year.

"I'm so in love with doing everything I can," he said.

Harrison Bench said he wants town officials to:

- commit to using 100 percent renewable energy by 2030
- create a committee focusing solely on preventing climate change
- become a “climate-smart community,” a state designation that would make Islip eligible for grants funding sustainability efforts
- designate a town staffer to work on environmental efforts full time



By Rachelle Blidner

rachelle.blidner@newsday.com

 @rachelleblidner

Rachelle Blidner covers the Town of Islip and
breaking news.