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Through Florence Savings, 37 nonprofits share $50K donation

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NORTHAMPTON - Thirty-seven local nonprofits have been chosen by Florence Savings Banks customers to receive a combined $50,000 after a year-round vote.

In its seventh year, the program allowed each customer a vote, and 7,439 votes were cast between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, according to bank officials. Customers could vote on the bank's Web site, **www.florencesavings.com**, in each branch location or by mail.

"It gives our customers a chance to tell us how to spend the grant money," said Susan A. Pepin-Phillips, the bank's marketing manager. "It's a heartwarming program that our customers look forward to participating in every year."

The program has given out $350,000 since it began in 2002.

To qualify, the nonprofit must be a 501(c)(3) or equivalent and agree to spend funds on local needs. Any organization receiving 1 percent or more, or 74 votes this year, of the total vote, received a proportional share of the funds. The maximum grant amount is $5,000 per organization.

Voting for the 2009 program began on Jan. 1 and will end on Dec. 31, 2009.

The grants were distributed at the Florence Savings Bank Customers' Choice Community Grants Awards ceremony at the Northampton Senior Center on Conz Street on Wednesday.

The ceremony included a presentation from first- and fifth-grade students at RK Finn Ryan Road Elementary School about items the school has purchased with the grant in years past. The school has won grants each of the seven years, totaling $25,302, which has been used for such projects as giving the students a place to hang their coats and cubbies for storage.

Thirty-one of the nonprofits received between $1,000 and $3,500.

After six years of receiving grants from the program, Northampton's Friends of Forbes Library was the top recipient for the first time. The nonprofit earned enough votes for a $3,500 grant - the largest grant it had ever been awarded through the bank, said Kari Knapp, president of Friends of Forbes. "The economy is bad and nonprofits are getting hit, too, so we're very thankful for this," she said. "It's really nice, especially for all of the nonprofits that work really hard."

Knapp said the money will go toward the organization's general operating budget, which gives around $16,000 annually to Forbes Library for books, other publications, museum passes, and other projects and programs.

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