

YOUTH COMMISSION BRIEFING PAPER #3

Youth Engagement and Local Planning: Ideas for Youth Commissions



This briefing paper addresses youth engagement and local planning.

This is the third in a series of briefing papers for youth commissions and councils¹ offered by the Institute for Local Government (ILG). These briefing papers provide background information and ideas for activities related to topics of concern to young people and their communities. They are disseminated to the staff of youth commissions and councils throughout California and can also be downloaded without cost at www.ca-ilg.org/briefingpapers.

This briefing paper focuses on engaging youth in local community planning. It includes:

- Background information about local planning;
- Ideas for how youth commissions can learn about and be involved in local planning processes;
- Examples of youth involvement in planning from California communities and beyond; and
- Online and other resources to assist youth commission members and staff to learn more about this topic.

¹ While there can be a distinction between the terms, in this paper we use “youth commissions” and “youth councils” interchangeably.

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This briefing paper is a joint effort of the Public Engagement and the Sustainability/Land Use and Environment programs of the Institute for Local Government. The Institute for Local Government is the nonprofit research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. Its mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California local officials and their communities.

For more information, please visit www.ca-ilg.org/engagement and www.ca-ilg.org/landuse. We are grateful to the Surdna Foundation for their support of this series of youth commission briefing papers.

1. Background

Why Should Communities Involve Youth in Planning?

Engaging youth in local planning offers a number of benefits to the community and to young people themselves. These benefits include:

- **Improved plans.** The participation of young people provides local officials with perspectives and input that can improve plans, especially (but not only) with regard to the needs and issues most relevant to youth.
- **Leadership opportunities.** Participating in the planning process offers young people an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills, learn responsibility and accountability, and develop meaningful relationships with other youth and adults. It also gives youth the opportunity to identify and address issues or challenges that directly affect their lives.
- **Citizenship and service.** Involvement in local planning allows young people to better understand their local government and community, to address community issues, and to develop habits of participation and good citizenship.
- **Better use of youth-serving resources.** Better information about the needs and interests of young residents helps local agencies make the best use of financial and staff resources directed to youth programs and services.
- **Exposure to careers in local government.** Through their engagement, young people learn about local planning and related professions and positions, and may consider careers local government.

2. How Do Communities Plan?

What is Planning?

City and county officials have many responsibilities. Among the most important is determining how the physical configuration of their communities will change, develop, and adapt to meet the present and future needs of their residents.

Communities guide their physical growth and development through local planning. Planning covers a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from new development on vacant land, to adaptation of existing structures for new uses, to more sweeping redevelopment of individual parcels of land and whole neighborhoods with new buildings and facilities.

Planning, at its most fundamental level, is both a process and a profession. Local officials, usually with resident input, use a collaborative *process* to determine the location, character, level and intensity of development that will be permitted or encouraged throughout their community, as well as the areas to be conserved and protected from development. Planning is also a *profession*, whose practitioners possess technical information, analytical tools and problem-solving approaches.

Why Plan?

Planning establishes goals and policies for directing and managing the future growth and development of a community or region. For example, cities and counties use planning to address fundamental issues such as the location and rate of population growth, the character of development, transportation and housing needs, economic vitality, sustainability, and environmental protection.

Good planning also helps create a sense of place and community, protect and enhance property values, safeguard public health, and promote public safety.

The Local Planning Framework

When cities and counties plan, they consider a range of issues, from the big picture vision of how the community as a whole should grow and develop to the fine details of how particular buildings and facilities will fit in with other uses that share space on a neighborhood street. Local officials employ a number of planning tools to address the unique issues and considerations that occur at each of these levels. Some of these tools include:

- A variety of local plans;
- Zoning and subdivision ordinances;
- Design, architectural, or historic review;
- Environmental review;

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- Development agreements; and
- Dedications and fees on development.

Different Kinds of Plans

The general plan is the foundation for local land use planning. When a city or county adopts a general plan, it creates a long-term vision for the community, looking ahead ten, twenty, or more years into the future. This vision is translated into objectives, goals, policies, and implementation programs for the physical development of the community. The general plan covers all of the land within the jurisdiction and any additional land that, in the agency's judgment, bears a relationship to its planning. All other local land use ordinances and policies flow from the general plan. Projects will not be able to proceed unless they are found to be consistent with the general plan.

A community plan is part of the general plan, focusing on a particular neighborhood or community within the larger jurisdiction. Community plans allow a city or county to concentrate on the most pressing issues and develop strategies and actions best suited for particular communities without going through the time and expense involved in revising or updating the general plan as a whole.

Specific plans are a flexible planning tool typically used for larger areas, such as a downtown district or a major transportation corridor. They are often used to combine the focus provided by a community plan with the specifics of a zoning ordinance and the investments included in a capital improvement program. Specific plans, while not a part of the general plan, must be consistent with it.

Many cities and counties are developing climate action plans to address the causes and consequences of climate change. Climate action plans typically include an inventory of greenhouse gas emissions within the community, an emissions target, and a series of goals and actions the community proposes to take to reduce emissions. Climate action plans may also include an assessment of the hazards posed by climate change, such as flood risks from rising water levels, health impacts from heat events or changes in patterns of exposure to disease, the effect on water quality and supply, or the number and severity of wildfires, along with measures the community and its residents can take to address the hazards.

While land-use planning is primarily a local responsibility, some issues that transcend local boundaries, such as transportation and air quality, are also addressed through regional plans. Regional planning agencies are governed by local officials selected by their peers to serve on agency boards. Local officials and the public have a number of opportunities to participate in the regional planning process to ensure that their views are taken into consideration on issues affecting their community.

Some jurisdictions also develop a **youth master plan** to guide the establishment and implementation of programs, activities, and resources for community youth.

3. How Can Youth Commissions and Councils Get Involved in Planning?

There are a variety of ways that youth commissions and councils can become more informed about planning and participate in planning processes in their own communities. Here are a few ideas.

Learn More about Planning

- Youth commissions can educate themselves about planning and the important roles and functions of local governments and the public in this important area. Review the section, *Who Does What in the Planning Process*, on page 4 of this briefing paper. Resources offered by the Institute for Local Government, such as the *Understanding the Basics of Land Use and Planning* series, the *Land Use One-pagers*, and other materials, may be useful to review.
- Use the *Where to Get More Information* section (on page 9) to locate many other print and online resources, some designed specifically for youth.
- Ask planning department staff to make a presentation to your youth commission about local planning and the role of planners, planning commissions, etc.

Learn More about Planning in Your Community

- Learn about your own city's or county's current general plan - or other local plans - in order to gain an understanding of the long-term goals and policies that guide local land use and related decisions. To get started, review the appropriate sections of your city or county website for information, and talk with staff from your city or county planning department. The California Land Use Planning Information Network (see <http://ceres.ca.gov/planning>) has a searchable database that you can use to find your community's general plan.
- Observe your local planning commission to better understand its responsibilities and activities. Interview commission members to learn about their perspectives on local planning and their motivation to serve as commissioners.
- Ask planning department staff to brief your youth commission about current local planning issues and challenges, especially those that impact youth.
- Find out from your planning department if a new general plan update - or other local or regional plan - is planned or underway.

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Find out what avenues are presently available in your community to involve youth in land use, climate change, youth master planning, or other planning processes.

Find Out How Youth Can Be Involved In Planning

Find out what avenues are presently available in your community to involve youth in land use, climate change, youth master planning, or other planning processes. Check with your local planning department for information or, as appropriate, through the city manager or county administrator. For regional plans, contact your regional planning organization (See <http://narc.org/regional-councils-mpos/listing-of-cogs-and-mpos-2.html>).

If there's a need, research the different approaches to youth engagement that have been used in other city or county planning processes. See the examples in this briefing paper, as well as other stories on the youth engagement pages of the Institute for Local Government website (www.ca-ilg.org/youthengagement). You can also contact other youth commissions that have been involved in local planning. An appropriate local official in your city or county may wish to poll their peers around the state about the youth engagement experiences of other communities.

If there is not an established way to engage youth in planning, youth commissioners can ask to work with the planning department or other local officials to develop an appropriate approach to involve young people in local planning efforts. (While it may be tempting to just have one or two young people appointed to a planning body, efforts seeking broader youth engagement will typically yield the most useful results – see examples below.)

Involve Your Community's Youth Commission in Local Planning

- If there is a current role for youth in local planning, discuss how youth commissioners could be involved directly, or how your youth commission could help educate other young people about planning processes and encourage their involvement.
- If asked, youth commissioners can also identify individual young people (whether youth commissioners or other community youth) to participate on city, county, or regional planning bodies.
- If youth commissioners are directly involved in the planning process, it may be helpful for them to host or facilitate face-to-face or online discussions with other youth in the community. These dialogues can help identify the needs and interests of young people.
- One option is to organize (with city or county planners) a special forum - or forums - for youth to discuss planning-related issues and share their ideas and recommendations as part of the overall planning process. These might be held at local middle or high schools, or other sites more likely to attract youth

participation. Youth could be involved in all aspects of the planning process or could identify and comment on areas of a plan that are particularly relevant to young people.

Youth commissions can also help identify youth-related community assets and create a resource guide that describes present youth programs, services, and other resources. This process, called asset mapping, can directly involve youth in efforts to better understand youth needs and services in the community. These “maps” can describe youth services and learning opportunities, programs and activities, and other organizational and individual youth serving resources - as well as gaps and areas needing improvement. This is information that can be helpful in developing local plans. For additional information, see www.outreach.msu.edu/bpbriefts/issues/brief4.pdf.

Another option is to create one or more part-time youth planner positions. Youth planners work with the local planning department and are responsible for the youth component of the general plan. In general, youth are especially helpful in determining how to best inform and involve other young people, as illustrated in the Hampton, Virginia example below.

4. How are Youth Involved in Local Planning in Other Communities?

Here are a few specific examples about how young people are involved in local planning. All are from California, except the Hampton, Virginia story.

Involving Youth in Setting a Community Vision

- **San Mateo County** leaders organized a “Shared Vision 2025” process consisting of ten public forums in 2007 to get broad public input in plotting a course for future development in the County. This visioning process built on a long-range plan that had been collaboratively developed with community input in 1999. The county held a series of facilitated community meetings designed to reach out to a broad cross-section of residents and to define a vision of what people want from and for their county over the next 15 years. Organizers specifically targeted groups of people who were typically less likely to show up to public meetings, such as non-English speaking residents and teens. 125 teens from around the county gathered at a “Youth Town Hall” meeting. Participants worked in small groups, with each electing a spokesperson to report out their goals.

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Engaging Youth in General Plan and Area Specific Planning

- The **City of San Carlos** formally included youth in city planning for the first time in 2006 by asking high-school students from the city's Youth Advisory Council to take turns serving as voting members on the General Plan Advisory Committee. This committee organized a series of forums to generate input from the larger community. In 2008, as part of the City of San Carlos general plan update process, approximately sixty middle- and high-school students attended a youth workshop where they were asked to describe San Carlos as they would like it to be in the year 2030. They encouraged the city to zone more areas for commercial development to attract more youth-friendly entertainment options.
- Through partnerships with public schools and local youth programs, the **City of Santa Monica** involved more than 500 local students of all ages in its General Plan update. City staff developed a youth planning toolkit with recommended activities to make it easy and fun for young residents to choose from a variety of issues to discuss and make recommendations.
- The **Lafayette City Council** invited a member of the city's youth commission to serve on a citizens' advisory committee that selected and advised a consultant for a two-year downtown planning process. The high-school student attended almost all of the 23 committee meetings and many of the ideas he contributed were reflected in the draft plan that was released in 2009.

Involving Youth in Climate Change and Environmental Planning

- The **City of Manhattan Beach** created an Environmental Task Force composed of diverse residents and city officials tasked with developing recommendations to the city council to address a range of environmental challenges, including climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In order to assure that young people would be represented, two seats on the sixteen person task force were set aside for youth members. An eighth-grader and a high school student were selected to serve alongside adult task force members. The group has made recommendations that were approved by the city council, including green building and water conservation measures.
- The **City of San Carlos** is currently developing a climate action plan that details steps the city will take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The city held two community forums to invite residents to help prioritize possible actions that the city could take to address climate change. One of the forums was held specifically to engage teens and pre-teens in the community. Seventy-five local youth participated in discussions and exercises that educated them about climate change and allowed them to prioritize proposed actions.

- In **El Dorado County**, the youth commission helped write a Green Resolution and supported its successful passage. The resolution sets goals to reduce the environmental footprint of county residents in areas including waste and energy usage reduction, planning, construction and air quality.
- The **City of Fremont's** Climate Action Plan project manager formed an eleven-member citizen's advisory group that includes five high school students who are interested in encouraging the community to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. City staff asked students in an active high school environmental club to do a presentation on how to set up a recycling program at school. These young people invited their peers, and city staff arranged to provide required community service hours to students who attended.

Tapping Teens as Community Planners

- The **City of Hampton, Virginia** created two part-time positions for teens as Youth Planners in 1997. The Youth Planners work fifteen hours a week after school for two years and are responsible for overseeing the youth component of the city's Comprehensive Plan. Beginning with the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, this document has an entire section (the first of its kind in the country) written entirely by young people and focused on youth issues. A recognized leader in youth engagement, the City of Hampton provides young people with training to survey their peers, make recommendations to the city council, serve on city boards and commissions, and participate in city planning.
- The **City of Emeryville's** high-school students have participated in a model of youth engagement in city planning, called Youth-Plan, Learn, Act, Now! (**Y-PLAN**), directed by the Center for Cities and Schools at the University of California, Berkeley. Under Y-PLAN, university mentors, local high-school students, and teachers partner with government agencies, the private sector, and other community organizations to work on real-world planning issues. Working in tandem with the Emeryville General Plan Update process, the students developed strategies for accessible community spaces, better housing opportunities, and a vibrant street life. The students prepared a presentation to the city council that detailed their experiences and outlined their visions and strategies.

Engaging Students in the Classroom

- The **City of Lemon Grove** launched the Lemon Grove Kids City Planning Program while preparing an update of the General Plan. Due to time constraints and limited resources, the city's planning consultant focused activities on a single fifth grade class. Three consecutive sessions were conducted in consecutive

weeks. The first session introduced city planning concepts to the students and afterwards the students constructed a variety of building types. The second session focused on the type of land-use categories found in cities. The students then constructed a model of their ideal city. In the final session, students discussed what they liked most and least about their city. Many of the student's ideas were adopted in the Lemon Grove General Plan.

Developing a Youth Master Plan

- The **City of Pleasanton** has involved its young residents in the development of the city's youth master plan. In 1998, the city launched an effort to determine the needs of residents under 22, which culminated in a youth master plan adopted in 2001. In 2009, another generation of Pleasanton youth had different needs, prompting an update to the original plan. The city established a twenty-six member Youth Master Plan Implementation Committee (YMPIC) that included nine middle and high school students. Pleasanton conducted 30 community focus groups as part of the plan update process, and YMPIC members participated in several facilitated discussions to identify their interests.

5. Where to Get More Information

The Land Use and Environment Program (www.ca-ilg.org/landuse) of the Institute for Local Government offers resources, examples, links, and contacts related to land use and planning. These resources include three publications in the new **Understanding the Basics of Land Use and Planning** series: the *Guide to Local Planning* (www.ca-ilg.org/planningguide); the *Glossary of Land Use and Planning Terms* (www.ca-ilg.org/planningterms); and the *Guide to Planning Healthy Neighborhoods* (www.ca-ilg.org/healthyneighborhoodsguide).

The Public Engagement and Collaborative Governance Program (www.ca-ilg.org/engagement), of the Institute for Local Government offers information and resources to help local officials in California make good decisions about the design and use of public engagement in their cities and counties. For more information about youth commissions and councils in California, see www.ca-ilg.org/youthengagement

The (California) Governor's Office of Planning and Research (www.ca-ilg.org/opr), has produced many useful resources on planning.

The California Land Use Planning Information Network (www.ceres.ca.gov/planning) has a searchable database by geographic location that you can use to locate your communities general plan.

The Hampton, VA Youth Planner Program (www.hampton.gov/youth/images/images/planners.pdf) was created to ensure a positive community for Hampton's youngest residents and a permanent opportunity for youth to be involved in city decision making.

ResourcesZine (www.planning.org/resourceszine/index.htm) developed by the American Planning Association, is a searchable database with hundreds of ideas for involving young people in planning and teaching them about environmental protection, urban design, civic engagement, geography and GIS, and other planning-related topics.

Kids and Community Webpage (www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity) is a part of the American Planning Association website intended for children and youth. It includes youth activities and examples of youth engagement in planning.

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (www.nlc.org/iyef), a special entity within the National League of Cities (NLC), helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities.

Youth Participation in Community Planning (*PAS Report #486*) is a report from the American Planning Association (1999), that provides an overview of successful participation program form around the country. Available in photocopy; visit www.planningbooks.com.

Youth Voices in Community Design: A How-to Guide for Adults on Involving Youth in Community Planning, by the California Center for Civic Participation: [www.californiacenter.org/docs/Youth Voices in Community Design 2004.pdf](http://www.californiacenter.org/docs/Youth%20Voices%20in%20Community%20Design%202004.pdf)

Youth Participation in Public Policy at the Local Level: New Lessons from Michigan Municipalities, from the Winter 2009 National Civic Review, highlights strategies for strengthening youth participation in public policy at the local level. Download at: www.deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/2027.42/64901/1/273 ftp.pdf.

Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making, by the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Forum for Youth Investment: www.ca-ilg.org/BuildingEffectiveYC.



INSTITUTE FOR
LOCAL GOVERNMENT

1400 K Street, Suite 205, Sacramento, CA 95814

916.658.8208 Fax: 916.444.7535

www.ca-ilg.org