

Involving Youth in Your Agency's Sustainability Activities



Local agencies use a variety of methods to involve young people in local government. Many cities and counties have active youth commissions or youth councils. As local agencies embrace sustainability goals, new opportunities emerge to engage young people. Whether the sustainability activities involve energy efficiency, planning for a more bike-friendly downtown, responding to climate change or updating a General Plan, local agencies throughout California can benefit by including youth as part of the process.

Asking youth for their input allows the local agency to benefit from the fresh perspectives of young residents who have the most at stake in their community's long-term future. Youth involvement can also help local agencies more cost-effectively target the resources serving them. Such participation also gives young people opportunities to identify and address issues or challenges that directly affect their lives and the well-being of their communities. And exposing young people to local government and the roles and responsibilities of staff and elected officials may lead them to consider careers in local government.

Involving young people also offers the potential to add to the community's awareness and support for the sustainability effort under way. Consider, for example, how news about a sustainability program or policy can "go viral" when the young people involved share information about their participation and excitement using social media, such as Twitter or Facebook.

Youth, Planning and Climate Change

The scientific consensus is that climate change will have a direct and indirect impact on Californians, including young people who may be more affected as the consequences of climate change become increasingly pronounced over their lifetimes. Young people hear and learn about climate change from a variety of sources and have varying degrees of understanding of the science, impacts and ways to address climate change.

Increasing numbers of cities and counties are developing climate action plans, as well as incorporating sustainability policies into their General Plans. Many also include policies to address climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in General Plan updates.

Virtually all of the strategies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions also promote local sustainability and provide opportunities to engage youth. For example, making communities more walkable and bicycle friendly can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by decreasing vehicle use. Input from youth can help improve the effectiveness of these policies, because young people frequently walk and bike to their destinations.

San Mateo County leaders organized a “Shared Vision 2025” process consisting of 10 public forums in 2007 to get broad public input in plotting a course for the next 15 years of development in the county. As part of a series of community meetings designed to reach a wide cross section of residents, organizers specifically targeted groups of people who were typically less likely to attend public meetings, such as teens. About 125 teens from throughout the county gathered at a youth town hall meeting and worked in small groups, with each electing a spokesperson to report the goals their group identified.

Positive Messages about Climate Change Are the Best Approach

Some researchers have noted the potential for increased anxiety among youth due to climate change and its future impacts. Educating young people about how they and their community can address climate change through policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as through individual behaviors, such as recycling and using less energy, is a more positive and effective approach than repetitive “doom and gloom” messages about the future impacts of climate change.

The Manhattan Beach City Council asked its Environmental Task Force to develop recommendations to address a range of environmental challenges, including climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. To ensure that young people would be represented, two seats on the 16-person task force were set aside for youth members. An eighth-grader and a high-school student served alongside the adult task force members. The task force proposed recommendations that were approved by the city council, including green building and water conservation measures.

In developing its climate action plan, the City of San Carlos held two community forums where residents helped prioritize possible actions that the city could take to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. Seventy-five teens and preteens participated in one forum, which included discussions and exercises that educated them about climate change and allowed them to share their ideas about which actions the city should adopt.

In Fremont about 150 residents — one third of them youth — attended a community event to prioritize the recommendations of a green task force. They also signed pledges to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions.

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.

Youth and Energy

Investing in energy efficiency and promoting energy conservation saves resources and money while reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Involving youth in energy-related policies and programs benefits not only the youth but the community as well, as the following examples illustrate.

The San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation, in partnership with San Diego Gas & Electric Co., offers a program called Energy Saving Adventures at its two teen centers in Lakeside and Spring Valley. The program teaches teens about the practices and principles of energy efficiency through classroom and recreation center activities, field trips, outdoor adventures and school and community events. The Energy Saving Adventures program is designed to inspire San Diego youth to practice and promote energy-saving initiatives in their own homes and communities.

The City of Indio's Youth Advisory Council and other young Indio residents were asked to share ideas about how to design a new teen center. The resulting center is not only fun but also solar-powered, thanks to the climate- and energy-conscious youth who were involved in its planning.

Santa Clarita's second annual art contest encourages middle- and high-school students to tell the city how they and their families are combating escalating gas prices by using the city's buses. "Go Green and Dump the Pump!" is part of the Santa Clarita Transit Go Green Art Contest, which accepts traditional art, graphic design or photography entries. The city displays the winning artwork at its Transit Maintenance Facility.



Looking to Our Future

The saying, "We are only borrowing the planet from our children," speaks volumes about the importance of engaging youth in local agencies' sustainability activities. In addition to the experiences and values that the young people gain from participating, youth engagement in local sustainability activities provides local officials with perspectives and input to improve both the planning and implementation of these efforts. The future belongs to our youth, and it is their future to help plan.

Does Your Agency Have a Story to Tell?

Does your agency involve young people in activities related to sustainability? Do you have a story to tell? For more information about how to share your agency's story with colleagues statewide, e-mail sustainability@ca-ilg.org.

For additional resources on engaging youth in sustainability, go to www.ca-ilg.org/InvolvingYouthSustainability to download a PDF of the companion resource for this article.

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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