

UNIT 6:

YOUR GOVERNMENT: YOU MAKE THE CHOICES

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE STUDENTS OF CITY HIGH SCHOOL

The city council Tuesday adopted a resolution congratulating the efforts of City High School's government class on its project, "Reinventing City Government." The class of 32 students, guided by teacher Tom Gorski, presented its project to the city council last week in a special council session held at the high school.

"I am not at all embarrassed to say that these young people know a lot more about how our city is run than I did when I first ran for office," said Mayor Serena Williams. "I'm not sure these kids realize how much this city has changed in the last 20 years, but I feel confident they will be able to handle the changes that are still to come."

The project was the result of a course at City High that teaches students about local government by having them "build" a new city government on paper.


Students met on several occasions with city staff members in the Planning, Finance and Human Services Departments, and they expressed their gratitude for the staff's assistance in their research.

The resolution singled out the students' willingness to give every aspect of city government a new look. The students' report, presented by Kiera Chan, Carey Cruz, Heidi Felderstein, Jason Johnson, Tran Nguyen and Arnsi Sandhu, featured a new general plan for the city, a preservation plan and an all-new tax structure. While the students called for a better public library, they included a plan for organizing a youth community service project to help in the library.

"Frankly, I found myself wishing that our town looked more like what these students described than what we actually have today," said Council Member Mary Yamata. "Maybe we need to think about why it isn't more like that!"

This city has paid a lot of money to consultants whose reports weren't as thorough and helpful to us as this student project," said Council Member Lan Truong. "I fully expect to see some of them sitting up here as members of this council someday soon."

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IT'S YOUR TURN

The government of the city or county where you live is the result of many years of choices and decisions made by the people who have lived there and actively involved themselves in the affairs of their community.

As a student, it may sometimes seem to you that all the decisions that shape your world have already been made. Think again! Democratic government always welcomes energetic, involved people. The legacy to make the choices that impact our communities will always be passed down to a younger generation.

You and your class, by looking at your community and by thinking about the descriptions of government in this book, can take a fresh look at these decisions. What type of city would you like to live in? What customs and traditions would you like to preserve? To whom will you delegate the authority to make day-to-day decisions? What types of services will your city provide its residents?

To begin, your entire class must first decide on a vision for your city. The goal is to express in a few words what your city should try to be like. This "mission statement" will direct the overall development of your city, and should be worded carefully.

Your class will then be divided into five committees, each responsible for researching and planning one element of your city. Each committee will select:

- A chairperson who will meet regularly with the other committee chairpersons to coordinate the class effort.
- A committee reporter to record group progress.

The class will assemble a city planning binder that contains the final plan from each committee, supported by drawings, charts or graphs. Notes from each group will also be included in the binder to demonstrate the preparation and progress of each group.

Committee One

PRESERVING OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE

What is it about your community that you want to preserve, to keep from changing while the rest of the world changes all around us? What can your city do to preserve its history, culture and traditions?

Using what you know about the past, you can preserve the best of your community's cultural heritage, building on that knowledge to create a rich and dynamic future. Group One will identify the special places, events and traditions that make your city unique. You will decide which of these qualities to retain, replace or enhance, and then propose ways to make sure that your choices are, in fact, preserved.

Brainstorm

Your team could conduct an in-person or online survey to ask a variety of questions:

- What events take place in your city that make it special?
- To which places would you take an out of town guest to show off your city?
- What historically significant places and people make your city unique?
- What cultural activities, in art, music, drama or other form, enrich your city?
- What recreational events and activities does your city sponsor?
- What kinds of ordinances could a city council pass to preserve special places and events?
- Are there actions that city departments could take to preserve special places and events?

List Your Information Sources

Where would you go to get information about your city? Consider the following:

- Parents, neighbors or other community members can tell you about what drew them to the area. Ask them what they would like to see preserved in the future.
- Look through library files of past newspapers to identify some of the annual or seasonal events that take place in your city.

- Check the city and county government sections in the telephone directory for agencies that deal with historical, social and cultural places and events.
- Contact a representative of the historical society in your city.
- Older adults and long-time residents can tell you how the city has changed over their life time. What would they like to have seen preserved? What would they preserve in a city of the future?

Gather Your Information

Investigate or interview as many of your listed information sources as you can. Each member of the group should investigate at least one source from the list and carefully record what they learn.

In preparing your final report, you will not only talk about what should be preserved, but also why. For example, if you feel that a building should be preserved because of its historical significance, explain why it is significant.

Try to present all sides of your issue. If you feel that an event should be continued, explain why. Does it improve the quality of life for the community? Why? Does it attract tourists, and therefore money, to the city? What kind of revenue is produced? What kind of services are impacted by the event? What is the impact on the environment? Who might object to your plan, and how might their concerns be addressed?

Write A Preservation Plan

Decide as a group which are the five most important events, places and qualities you would use city resources to preserve. Keep in mind the mission statement your class worked out for your city.

Write a one-page proposal for each of your group's top five priorities. Each essay should:

- Be written as a persuasive speech to convince the committee that each of these events, places or activities is essential to your community.
- Be addressed to a city council and/or a specific budget or finance committee.
- Describe the event, place or quality that is the goal of your preservation effort.
- Explain why the proposal is important.
- Lay out a detailed preservation strategy, including an estimate of costs.

Committee Two

CHOOSING A GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

What kind of structure would you choose for your city to provide services efficiently and to be responsive to resident's needs? How should your government be arranged to encourage the broadest participation of residents in making decisions? The city and county structure charts outlined in Unit 2 may be helpful.

Group Two will study how these decisions could affect your city and then present its recommendations for the type of government organization that will reflect your thoughts and conclusions.

Brainstorm

The following are some of the decisions that must be made in the process of selecting a structure for your local government:

- Should your community be incorporated into a city? Is your city government doing things that could be done better by a different agency or a private company? Could money be saved by not having a city administration with separate departments for police, fire, public works, parks and other services?
- Should your city be large or small? What does your group think would be an ideal size for your city? What are the advantages and disadvantages of large or small cities? How could your city slow down its rate of growth? How could it grow more quickly? If you could divide the city where you live into smaller units to match your ideal size, what parts of town would your group place into your new city and why?
- How should representatives be elected? Should elected officers represent a specific section of the city, or should they represent the city at-large? Where should they live? How would it make a difference if you wished to run for city council? What if you wanted to talk to your representative about a serious problem in your neighborhood?
- Who should run the city? Who should be responsible for hiring city staff? Who should be responsible for drawing up the city budget? Should executive power be held by an elected mayor or by an appointed city manager? What should be included in the job description of the city manager? Should public boards and commissions of residents be named to oversee certain important city departments?

List Your Information Sources

When making important decisions, it always helps to find out what others may think. Who are some people who might have thoughts and ideas about these questions? Consider interviewing the following:

- Professors of government at a local community college or university.
- Community organizations such as an historical society, a taxpayers' association and chambers of commerce usually have strong opinions on questions of municipal organization.
- Newspaper reporters who cover city and other local government issues.
- The head of a special district in your area.
- Members of the city council.
- Directors of any city departments you may be interested in. Your city attorney could be particularly helpful.

Gather Your Information

For each issue, choose at least two informed outside sources to consult for information and opinions. Each member of the group should interview at least one source from your group list and keep detailed notes as part of your group's record.

Discuss your interviews as a group, and decide which thoughts and opinions are the most important in developing your plan.

Write An Organization Plan

Your group will set the ground rules for giving your city government a complete makeover. Your organization plan will consist of a position paper on the four key issues of city organization:

- Should your community be incorporated into a city?
- Should your city be large or small?
- How should representatives be elected?
- Who should run the city?

Each position paper should clearly state the issue and your group's recommendation. It should explain the factors affecting your decisions and your group's reasoning for coming to its conclusions.

Committee Three

PROVIDING CITY SERVICES

What services are absolutely essential for a safe, orderly, livable and healthy community? What other functions might a city provide to improve the quality of life?

Imagine starting your city government from scratch, without any pre-existing obligations to provide any services to anybody. What work would need to be done for the public's health and safety? Does your city's mission suggest doing the absolute minimum in the interest of keeping costs down, or is your city willing to spend more to do things that are important to its residents?

Group Three will take a look at the services that cities provide their residents, weigh their relative importance and consider other possible services that might benefit your community. You will then draw up a community service plan for your city that reflects what you want your local government to do for its residents.

Brainstorm

What services are provided by local governments to help your family maintain its home, whether in an apartment or in a single-family house?

- What services are currently being provided by your city, county, or special district that you feel might be better provided in some other way, either through private agencies or other public agencies?
- In your city, what functions do you feel people should take responsibility for doing themselves?
- What are some things currently done by the city, county or special district where you live that you feel you could live without?
- If cost were not an important consideration, what do you imagine could be done with tax resources to make your life easier or more interesting?
- What services might be especially important for different groups within your community, such as children, retirees or minorities?

List Your Information Sources

Your group will want to gather as much information as it can about the services already being delivered to your community and about problems and unmet needs in which city government should take an interest. Some places to look for sources of information and opinions:

- Your city manager's office should be able to provide a complete list of what is currently being done for your community by the existing departments.
- Neighboring cities probably do things differently from what is currently done in your city. They may be able to give your group some interesting ideas.
- Your elected representatives may already be interested in some potential services for which financial or public support has not yet been fully developed. They may have some ideas to share. Your local United Way office can provide a list of the public service agencies funded by the United Way in your area.
- Using the United Way's list, you should be able to find some public service agencies that do the kind of work you may be considering for your service plan.
- What other community groups have you heard of in your area? Groups like the Urban League, the League of Women Voters, and service groups like Kiwanis, Lions or Rotary may have some interests that could fit into your plan.
- This is your opportunity to include some of your special interests in your plan. Consider anything and everything, from skate parks to public wifi to libraries open 24 hours. Groups supporting similar kinds of activities could also be included on your information source list.

Gather Your Information

Decide collectively which sources are the most important to contact. Your group will assign each member to contact and research at least one of the sources on your list. Each member should keep detailed notes as part of your group's record.

Discuss your interviews and research as a group, and decide which thoughts and opinions are the most important in developing your plan.

Write A Community Service Plan

1. Assemble an organizational chart for your city, the way you would like to see it organized. To promote efficiency, allow yourselves only five city departments altogether. The chart will show which departments your city will include, and who will report to whom. For example, if you choose to have a planning department, will its staff report to a planning commission of appointed community members, to the city manager, or directly to the elected city

council? When you have completed a draft chart, meet with the members of Group Two to see if there are any conflicts in your plans.

2. For each department, prepare a one-page summary of the services it will provide. Describe:
 - » What the department's responsibilities will be.
 - » Why the department's activities are important to the well-being of the community.
 - » How the department will accomplish its tasks? For example, if the task is garbage pickup, will the city hire a refuse company or will it perform the task itself, hiring staff and buying trucks?
3. No city can do everything, and yours will be no exception. The third element of your plan will be a priority list for future funding. What activities must your city put on hold right now, but will take up again in the future when more funding becomes available?

Committee Four

PLANNING LAND USE

Most communities are eager to have new industries/businesses move in to help stimulate the local economy and provide new jobs. But where should the new business enterprise be located? How much land should be set aside for parks and recreation? Should your community include space for farms? Where should new homes be built, and where is a logical place to put apartment buildings?

These are some of the most basic questions that face decision-makers in any community.

Group Four will create a plan to assemble the basic building blocks of a modern city into a structure that is the kind of place where you would like to live, work and play.

Brainstorm

- **Problems:** What are some of the problems that face your community? What are the things that you don't like about where you live?
- **Causes:** Of these, which can be traced to how your community is laid out? Which are results of how the land is used in different places?
- **Tools:** Based on your studies, what are some of the things that a city government can do to influence how land is used?
- **Solutions:** How would you change things around your town?

List Your Information Sources.

To prepare your land use plan, your group will collect information about your city's current plans and challenges, and information and opinions about how plans for the future might be different. In preparing a contact list of individuals' names, you may wish to consider these possible sources of information:

- Professors of "urban planning" or "urban design" at local colleges and universities.
- Planning department staff members.
- Members of the local planning commission.
- Large landowners, developers or land use attorneys.
- Large local home building companies.
- Construction trade groups.
- Organizations, like Sierra Club, conservation or air quality groups.

Gather Your Information

Decide collectively which sources are the most important to contact. Your group will assign each member to contact and research at least one of the sources on your list. Each member should keep detailed notes as part of your group's record.

Discuss your interviews and research as a group, and decide which thoughts and opinions are the most important in developing your plan.

An important part of your plan will be the picture you draw of it. That picture will be in the form of a map. To prepare the map:

- Meet with the members of Group Two to learn how large your city will be. They may have chosen to work with the city where your school is located, or they may have decided to subdivide and incorporate a section of it into a separate city.
- Using a street map for your city, your group will draw a simplified copy onto a large piece of poster board. Select one person to do the drawing. You will not need to copy any streets onto your rough version, but you should indicate the following:
 - » Rivers, lakes or seacoast
 - » Railroads
 - » Freeways and the largest highways

Write A Land Use Plan

4. Your group will draw a land use map for your city. Using the map of your area you have already drawn, fill in enough information to give people an idea of where the important facilities and development will be. You may consider where some of these items are actually located, but you are also free to place them wherever your group would prefer to see them.

Shade in those portions of your map where your group plans to locate the following land uses:

- » Open space (OS)
- » Residential, single homes on large lots (R-1)
- » Residential, duplex and very small single-family homes (R-2)
- » Residential, apartment buildings (R-3)
- » Commercial (C)
- » Industrial (I)

On your map, mark the location of:

- » A water treatment plant
- » A sewage treatment plant
- » A city hall
- » A sports stadium
- » Schools

5. Your group will write a general plan to guide growth and development in your community for the future. While most general plans in cities today tend to be very complicated, yours will be honored for its simplicity! Conforming to state requirements, your plan will include a one-page essay to cover each of the following six elements:

- » Land use
- » Circulation
- » Housing
- » Conservation and open space
- » Noise
- » Safety

Each element will include:

- » A statement of purpose: What is the element trying to accomplish?
Example: Is the goal of the circulation element simply to get people to work on time? Or is the goal to get people to work with the least reliance on automobiles?
- » A brief description of the biggest problems and challenges must be overcome.
Example: Air pollution is a growing problem, while parts of your area will soon need to have more transportation facilities.
- » A list of actions, both active and passive, to be followed to achieve the element's goal.
Example: Construction of bike lanes or carpool lanes; more living units closer to downtown.

Committee Five

PAYING FOR IT ALL

While Groups One through Four have been thinking up the things they would like to see their city do for their community, Group Five will have the responsibility for finding the money to pay for it all. Who should pay for the services provided by local government? How can enough money be raised while still maintaining the support of the public that is essential to any democratic government?

Brainstorm

- What do you think the advantages are of each of the revenue sources generally available to local governments? What are their disadvantages?
- Are there any taxes or fees currently collected that you hope to reduce or eliminate? Which ones? Why?
- Which services outlined by Groups One, Three and Four could have charges tied to them? Which services does your group strongly feel should be provided without charge?
- What will it take to raise or lower the taxes and fees you might consider? A vote of the council? A special election?
- What sources of government revenues are established by other authorities beyond the power of your city to increase?
- What new ideas does your group have for raising funds for the services your class wants to see in its remodeled city?

List Your Information Sources

To prepare your finance plan, your group will collect information about the revenue sources currently in place and about the possible costs of any new programs your class wishes to write into its new city plan. Some sources to consider to obtain information:

- Your city and county finance offices
- The finance offices of other cities
- Local taxpayer's associations
- Local media
- Chamber of Commerce

Gather Your Information

Decide collectively which sources are the most important to contact. Your group will assign each member to contact and research at least one of the sources on your list. Each member should keep detailed notes as part of your group's record.

The results of your group's basic research will yield:

- **A total budget amount.** Based on the estimated population of your new city as determined by Group Two, your group will choose a dollar figure to represent your city's annual operating budget. This figure, which will be in the millions of dollars and should have some tie to real city budgets. For example, if your class decides to keep the same boundaries as the city in which you live, you can use its annual budget. An example could be \$200 million but you can research sample budgets online. If your new city is planned to be larger or smaller, use a fraction of that amount, or use the budget total for another city of the same size.
- **Typical property tax collections.** This would be the amount collected by the county and returned to the city in which you live (or a different city with a population close to that of your planned city).
- **Typical sales tax receipts.** Again, this would be the amount collected by the city in which you live, or a different city with a population close to that of your planned city. Your group will need to work with the planning group to discuss the number of businesses there will be, which will determine how much sales tax may be collected.
- **Information about other possible revenue categories.** If you plan to include user fees or other taxes, your group will need some basic information about how many people might use a service, how much can be charged and how much money could be raised altogether.

Write A Finance Plan

1. Given your group's goal of raising enough money to fund its annual budget, you will prepare a finance plan including the following information:
 - » **A revenue goal.** Explain what your group used as a base figure and any special additions for special services that may have been added.

- » **Property Tax Revenue.** Explain what you used as a base figure for a city your size and any strategies you propose for increasing the base amount.
 - » **Sales tax revenue.** Explain what you used as a base figure for a city your size and any strategies you propose for increasing the base amount.
 - » **Other tax revenues.** List which additional taxes you propose to collect and how much revenue each is likely to produce. Explain your assumptions and calculations. For example, how much would a 10 percent utility tax yield? Figure the typical household to have three people. Thus, a city of 30,000 would have 10,000 households. Make certain your numbers are plausible. For example, if the typical gas and electric bill is \$50, and your city added a 10 percent tax, your city would receive about \$5 per household, or \$50,000 total per month, or \$600,000 annually.
 - » **Service and user fees.** List those services for which your city plans to charge and collect revenue. Explain your assumptions and calculations for each fee, including how much a service would cost, how many people would pay and how much revenue would be raised.
2. Illustrate your finance plan by producing a pie chart showing how much of your city's revenues will come from each major category.

Presenting your city plan

Your class has now invested a lot of thought and effort in the blueprint for your new city. You have a complete plan that includes everything from the preservation of important buildings and events to the funding mechanisms that will pay for everything your city does. Your final challenge in your study of California local government will be to present your class plan to the people in your community who might be interested in your thoughts and observations.

1. Prepare a presentation. Each one of your five groups should practice presenting the element of your city's new plan. You should rely on your written reports as much as possible, without resorting to a lot of outside material. Each member of the group should be responsible for at least one part of your group's presentation. Determine how much time each group will have, and practice working your group presentation down to the time allotted. Think about the portions of your plan that are very different from how your city is set up today. Will people understand the importance of the changes you propose? Do these differences require special explanation? Finally, discuss what single message you would like to leave in the memory of your audience.

2. Prepare audio-visual aids. Audiences always retain more of a presentation when they have something to look at while they listen. Each group should work on a presentation aid, such as a slide or two, a webpage or short video that helps explain your group's work and point of view. Also give some thought to how you can record the event for future reference. A recording of your presentation will help future classes with similar projects and will be something you can enjoy in the future.

3. Plan your event. As a class, you have some important decisions to make:

- » Where to present? Where you present your work may have some effect on how it is received. Why not ask to use the council or supervisors' meeting chamber at your city hall or county building? You may want to ask to be placed on your council's agenda. Most local governments are very interested in working with students, and they will be interested in what you have to say. If it is not possible to be placed on the regular agenda, a special meeting could work. Are

there alternative sites that would work better for your class?

- » Whom to invite? As a courtesy, you will want to invite members of the community whom you have interviewed in the course of your research. You may also want to consider:

- Local elected officials
- Appointed local government staff, including city managers, county executive officers, general managers and department heads
- Developers active in your area
- Your school board and administration
- Representatives of community interest groups such as United Way, the League of Women Voters or Chamber of Commerce
- Your local newspaper, radio and television stations

4. Prepare to discuss your plan. Allow time to answer questions from your audience following your presentation. Some of the most important things you learn can come from the questions of people who first listen to what you have to say and then react to you. Remember to listen as well as speak. Your class may also want to designate one person to explain the plan to the press.

Your Keys to City Hall

If you and your class have taken the time to read each of the units and participate in at least some of the activities suggested, you should have some new ideas about government and about the government agencies closest to home in your community.

But What Good Is This Knowledge

If you have not already, you will soon reach the voting age of 18 in California. You will see that many offices and issues for which you cast your ballot will have to do with local government agencies - your city, county, school district, or community services, fire or other special district. Some knowledge about these important agencies makes your vote more meaningful.

Perhaps you will choose to lead your community and bring issues that you believe in before local legislative bodies; perhaps you will someday consider becoming a candidate for public office yourself.

As you watch television and read news blogs in the future, you will see and hear references to local government. Often, the news items on local government are so brief that they can be more confusing than enlightening to many people. Your background will not only help you make sense out of the news, but will also give you some perspective and, perhaps, motivation to encourage your local media to improve their coverage of local government.

Perhaps most important, you will be better prepared to evaluate what other people tell you about government. There are many individuals and interest groups who spend a lot of time, money and effort to persuade others of their point of view. Your background will help you evaluate this confusing deluge of fact and opinion and will give you the power to make decisions about government that reflect your own thoughts and opinions about how things should be run.

Think of your knowledge as a set of keys, not to your home or to a car, but to your community. Your knowledge is your set of keys to the chambers of city hall, the board of supervisors or the boards of your local special districts.

After all, your local government belongs to you.