

PLANNING

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FUTURE

INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS MEANS GETTING A FRESH TAKE.

By **WILLIAM ATKINSON**

PLANNERS make it their business to involve the entire community in the planning process. But young people sometimes fly under the radar even though they are a huge part of our communities and can have very different needs, perspectives—and tech skills—than their parents and grandparents.

“Youth deserve a place in the planning process, because, in the U.S., about one-fourth of the population is 18 and under,” says Kathryn Frank, PhD, an assistant professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Florida (Gainesville). “In addition, given their ages, they are important stakeholders, in that they will be living with planning decisions a lot longer than the adults.”

Still, according to Frank, youth do need some guidance. “They have their own ideas, but they need some assistance with understanding the issues being discussed, how to build support for their ideas, how to express these ideas, and how to be involved in the decision-making process,” she says.

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—KATHRYN FRANK, PHD, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNING, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA (GAINESVILLE)

SIDE

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—SUSAN SANTONE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
CREATIVE CHANGE EDUCATIONAL SOLUTIONS

Young people can also bring passion to the planning process, according to Susan Santone, founder and executive director of Creative Change Educational Solutions, a nonprofit organization based in Ypsilanti, Michigan, that offers curricula and teacher education on sustainability projects. “Young people feel a lot of issues very viscerally, because some issues directly impact their everyday lives,” Santone says. “I recall one situation where some high school students became very interested in zoning once they realized that it determined whether they could get somewhere without their parents. They were interested in making sure that there were things of interest to them that would be within walking distance.”

This group also brings creativity to the planning process. “Young people tend to be more creative and open-minded than adults in a lot of ways,” notes Dawn E. Jourdan, AICP, PhD, associate professor and director of the Division of Regional & City Planning at the University of Oklahoma (Norman). “They haven’t yet been taught the ‘rules’ of what can and can’t be done.” And, she says, they are also very persistent when it comes to solving problems. “They don’t get discouraged easily.”

According to Ben Esner, director of the Center for K–12 STEM Education at New York University (Brooklyn), which manages NYU’s Science of Smart Cities summer program for high school students, many young people are also keenly interested in using the latest technologies to address issues that a lot of adults may not be as familiar with. “They might say, ‘I can use a microcontroller, computer programming, and sensors all together to control the flow of traffic in my neighborhood so that it is safer for pedestrians, and vehicles can move more efficiently,’” Esner says.

Finally, making an effort to involve youth in community planning can be the first step to careers in planning for those who become involved and get engaged. “The opportunity to work on community planning in high school provides youth with exposure to planning as a career, because this is something that really isn’t taught in high schools,” says Frank.

And, according to Jourdan, there’s no such thing as someone being too young for being a part of the planning process. She should know. Jourdan is a member of the planning commission in



Amy Ma and Peter Kivimaki are Edina, Minnesota’s student planning commissioners. Student commissioners serve one-year terms and can serve up to two terms. They take part in all the commission’s discussions, but they can’t vote.

Norman. When her eight-year-old son attended a planning meeting with her recently, he became so interested in one of the topics being discussed that he asked permission to address the commission on that topic at the following meeting. “He’s already written out his notes and is preparing for the next meeting,” she says.

Student involvement in action

Some communities have already seen, and have been reaping, the benefits of having youth involved in their planning efforts.

One of these is Edina, Minnesota (pop. 49,596), which, in 2000, added one or more student representatives to all of its boards and commissions, with the exception of the planning commission, with the idea of getting them involved in local government and gaining a youth perspective on issues. By 2006, the planning commission saw the benefits and took on two student members. “The students who have served on the planning commission, even though they do not vote, are full participants in the discussion and provide a unique perspective that is appreciated by other members,” says Cary Teague, the community development director.

And the students have not been shy about providing input and sharing their views on development proposals. “Our students think of both the present and the future in different ways than many of

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us think, since they are not burdened with a sense of 'things have always been this way,' and have a longer horizon on the future that permits them to sometimes imagine greater possible future change," says Teague.

In Edina, young people have suggested more sidewalks, better pedestrian connections, and provisions for bike facilities. They tend to be more open to mixed use and higher-density development, and offer unique perspectives on architecture.

"We had one outstanding student member who was hired as an intern in the planning department," says Teague. (That young woman is currently a college student and hasn't decided whether she will chose a planning career or not.)

Another community that engages youth in the planning process is Newberg, Oregon (pop. 22,451). The city has a variety of programs involving youth, including high school student positions on the planning commission and traffic safety commission. "The first student planning commission member was in 2007, and the first traffic safety commission member was in 2009," says associate planner Jessica Pelz, AICP. Students are ex-officio (non-voting) members, and the intent of those positions is to bring different viewpoints to the deliberations.

"The students typically bring a quite sophisticated perspective, and at times have innovative ideas or ask questions that the adults might not," she says.

Involvement in the commissions has also encouraged other students to seek out opportunities and activities elsewhere in the community, such as the Ford Family Foundation Leadership Program. Another benefit is greater adult involvement, with kids bringing their parents to community meetings. Another youth involvement has resulted in better collaboration between the city and the school district.

"One difference that I have seen between students and adults is that students are often very engaged, curious about the process, and like to do hands-on projects such as sketching/drawing and field work—the more technical the better," says Sonja Johnson, an engineering associate in Newberg. She works with middle school students on city watershed and water quality projects. "One of the benefits of working with youth is that the city now seems more open to change. Based on what students have told me, they had no idea what we do, and there are always some who are very interested in what type of degree is required for my position."

While Biddeford, Maine, did not initially look into the idea of having students directly involved in planning, a high school project ended up snowballing to such a degree that the community is



As part of the Community Heart & Soul project in Biddeford, Maine, youth were invited to community meetings to discuss the future of their city. The project created a downtown master plan for Biddeford that helped spark revitalization. Biddeford High School teacher Carolyn Gosselin (right) and her class gathered stories from community members about the town's rich textile mill history. One of the most rewarding aspects of the project was how effectively the young people were able to connect with older generations and talk about their lives in the city (opposite right); in return, the younger generation discovered the connection between their own relatives and the former textile mills of Biddeford's heyday. This restored pride of place laid the foundation for positive change.



on a fresh new path that is reaping significant success.

"We are a postindustrial city, having gone through a lot of mill closures, with a lot of loss of jobs and subsequently loss of community pride and hope for the future," says Delilah Poupore, director of the Heart of Biddeford, a nonprofit founded in 2004 to help revitalize downtown. "There was even a trash incinerator installed in the middle of town in the 1980s. People in other towns began referring to Biddeford as 'Trash Town,' and this had an effect on the young people."

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**TEEN
INVOLVEMENT
SHIFTS
ATTITUDES,
INITIATES
CHANGE**

The Orton Family Foundation tapped into youth energy in the Community Heart & Soul project in Biddeford, Maine.

LISTEN:
tinyurl.com
/jou9j44

POD-
CAST

In 2009, Biddeford (pop. 21,303) launched a planning initiative in collaboration with the Orton Family Foundation, called Community Heart & Soul. “As part of this, we worked closely with high school teachers,” says Poupore. In one project, students interviewed their grandparents about why they had moved to Biddeford, the city’s glory days, and what they still cherished about the town. “Some of the grandparents pointed out buildings where they had had their first dates, where they had gone dancing, where they had gone bowling,” she says. “This gave the students a completely different view of their town.”

“By prioritizing these values and integrating them into subsequent projects, we found there was a lot less contention than there otherwise would be,” says Poupore.

Excitement and enthusiasm for Biddeford’s future began to grow. By 2011, the city council had approved a new Downtown Master Plan. In one forum to discuss the plan, some 40 high school students attended, providing a lot of input on the projects that they wanted to see. The last time Poupore checked, 80 percent of the initiatives in the plan had already been accomplished or are in process.

Then, in 2012, the city took a bold step: It purchased the land where the incinerator was located and demolished it. After that, people starting thinking about repurposing rather than tearing down the city’s old mill buildings, modernizing them to attract new businesses, Poupore says. A \$50 million project currently under way will convert a closed mill building into upscale apartments, a hotel, and restaurants.

A long-term benefit of Biddeford youth’s involvement is that, “as a result of their experiences, the students now have more hope for the town than they previously did,” Poupore says.

The level of participation in planning projects, triggered by the high school project, has also made it easier to get grants,” she says.

“When agencies find that you have 350 people actively involved in community development and planning, they are much more willing to seriously consider grant proposals.”

And then there’s this outcome. “Sitting four feet from me is a high school graduate who was involved in the grandparent interviewing project,” says Poupore. “She attended the University of New England–Biddeford, and is now our AmeriCorps-VISTA representative, because she wants to stay in Biddeford and make a difference here.”

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WHO ARE APA AMBASSADORS?

The APA Ambassadors pilot program is made up of active members of the American Planning Association of any age and level of experience who volunteer their time, experience, and talents to advance the public understanding of planning and promote the planning profession. APA Ambassadors have been active at schools and community events, raising awareness about the importance of planning and the profession. Learn more at tinyurl.com/jgm224c.

