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The Planning and Zoning Officials Academy provides local elected and appointed officials with both basic and advanced topics addressing issues unique to the role as a local government representative. Excerpts of this article are used with permission by the American Planning Association.

Youth engagement in planning

By Ramona Mullahey

What empowers a community — where ordinary people create better places, transform their own and others' lives while solving the public problems of the day? Inclusive planning, for starters. In recent years planning has made great strides in mobilizing broad participation, incorporating a diversity of interests and stakeholder groups of different cultural and economic backgrounds and ages. At the same time, America is home to more immigrants and the diversity of its citizens is expanding.

Planning has also given voice to children and youth, who are often marginalized from the process. Too often, planners, citizens, and officials hold stereotyped opinions about young peoples' capacity to grasp the long-term consequences of actions and their perceived limitations of experience and expertise.

Youth provide a unique and fresh voice to the dialogue. In a growing number of circumstances, children and youth are taking a more active role in shaping their communities. Educator George Wood says, "We need young people engaged as democratic citizens ... who will have ... the self-confidence tempered with empathy that it takes to act on behalf of the common good."

Youth engagement has taken many forms. Often youth will be involved in the initial visioning stages of the planning process, where young people participate as a constituent group. An ideal planning process is met with the following goals:

* Young people have multiple opportunities to speak about the issues that concern them.

* They experience a sense of satisfaction about their participation.

* They know they have had real influence over issues that are critical to improving the quality of life in their communities.

* They become genuine partners in the planning, design, and decision making.

When these goals have been met, the young develop the ability to put democratic citizenship into action and come away from the planning experience with an increased level of social responsibility to the common good.

Initiatives to encourage youth involvement are greatly served by recognizing the importance that interpersonal relationships play in enriching the lives of young people. Youth engagement programs are more successful when the participants are surrounded by supportive relationships. These relationships play a significant role in how quickly a young person grasps the larger context for community problem solving.

More planning for youth

The American Planning Association (APA) published Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Report Number 486, *Youth Participation in Community Planning*.

This PAS Report explores examples of how communities have involved children and youth in their planning endeavors, social activism, and policy making.

The Report is an informative guide that provides planners with practical tools for their citizen participation tool box. It includes a typology for thinking about young people's participation in projects, describes some of the techniques used to engage this younger constituency, identifies key elements in designing an effective program, and presents newly emerging models from forward-thinking communities that attempt to formalize newly empowered youth in decision making. Further, it informs practicing planners and community decision makers about how they may take the following steps:

- Establish a new paradigm for citizen participation
- Examine the benefits of youth participation in planning and decision making
- Discuss a typology for youth participation
- Provide examples of how communities have engaged young people in planning
- Identify some common elements in designing a youth participation program
- Introduce examples of youth-based initiatives for social change
- Profile emerging models

Download a copy of PAS Report 486 at [http:// www.planning.org/education/youth/pdf/pas486.pdf](http://www.planning.org/education/youth/pdf/pas486.pdf).

The APA Web site also contains

teacher/student exercises and activities, as well as additional resources in making youth engaged in the community.