



*Edina, MN Planning Commission.  
Source: City of Edina*

## HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE ENGAGING YOUTH: AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT WITH TRANSPORTATION

a three-part series

# Youth on local government boards

**COMMUNITIES ARE REACHING OUT TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN MEANINGFUL WAYS AND ENJOYING THE BENEFITS.** We looked at three main ways municipalities engage youth: by having youth serve on the city boards and commissions; by having a youth-only board that reports to local government on various issues; and by having youth involved in specific projects of the community.

Local governments use boards and commissions to make important decisions and establish policies that affect various areas of governance. These boards are typically composed of appointed community members or elected officials. Cities are finding ways to include youth to increase youth participation in local affairs and get input on issues of importance to youth. This resource describes the role of youth serving as members of

community boards with a focus on transportation-related boards, and presents considerations for communities that are evaluating how to include youth. We interviewed local officials from five municipalities with populations under 65,000 people: Birmingham, MI; Eden Prairie, MN; Edina, MN; Farragut, TN; and Tukwila, WA. Each have had youth on boards for at least five years, with one in operation since the 1990s.

## Focus on transportation

Youth are impacted by, and have opinions about, transportation safety and transportation options. As described in the Vision Zero for Youth resource, *Engaging Youth to Advance Safer Streets for All*, “youth in high school and early adulthood across the country have a long track record of caring about road safety and are having an impact on safe transportation in their communities. Many young leaders were motivated to act after a traffic crash that impacted their school community. They are encouraging more walking and biking and advocating for infrastructure improvements and policy change, all to create safer, more livable communities for everyone.”

## Benefits of representation for youth and their communities

City staff we interviewed were excited to talk about the benefits of youth representation on boards that have traditionally been comprised of adults. It is hard to separate the benefits for one from the other. Most noted a major benefit was a strengthened relationship with the local school district. City leaders also expressed how valuable having a different perspective can be. One said, “youth offer an outside perspective because sometimes adults can be more one-sided with similar experiences.” Another said, “I prefer integration [of youth and adults together]; you get the intergenerational discussion and dialogue. We get more diversity with our youth.” Another explained that since youth are younger, they are sometimes closer to the topic that is being discussed.



Eden Prairie, MN noted that “inclusion is a topic today’s youth grow up with,” and provided an excellent example of how youth brought important perspectives on special needs for a new playground. When Eden Prairie planned to add adaptive ziplines, one of the youth pointed out “you can add adaptive ziplines but if you place them separate from the rest, then I can’t play with those kids ...”

When asked about the value of board membership for youth, one person replied, “students learn in school about higher level government and less about local government.” Another added “I think that’s really valuable...to see how things come together; why that sidewalk got added.” It is a great experience for college applications and for life in general and can provide continuity for municipalities. “Youth are future voters and taxpayers...getting them engaged can be very beneficial,” stated one community. Indeed, youth in interviewed communities have subsequently served in adult positions on commissions and roles in city government.

Farragut, TN’s positive experiences led them to envision creating a hybrid approach where youth both serve on boards and come together as their own council to report out on issues, start their own community service initiatives, and provide recommendations to the mayor. This concept was brought up by other groups as well.





# Implementation

## AGE

In all five communities interviewed, youth representatives are high school students. One place preferred rising juniors who could serve two terms, others just recruit rising seniors. Terms typically align with the school year.

## RECRUITMENT

Effective recruitment was cited as essential to getting the right applicants, meaning finding youth that have the time to contribute and are interested in the topics. One noted that if youth drop out it is typically that they are overscheduled.

Partnering with school districts was seen as a huge asset. "It's very important to get schools in on the application process." Strategies included using the school district representatives on boards to recruit students, city staff going to the high school during lunch to talk with students, and city council members meeting with civics classes. "If there's a student group, such as environmental, STEM or transportation, that aligns with your topic, reach out to that club." Some teachers have their students attend city meetings so they can learn about opportunities.

Eden Prairie credits strong school participation for a great pool of applications. "Once we had principals and guidance counselors involved, they got the word out to the students. Now the program is well established, and people know about it. Recently we got 65 applicants for 42 positions."

## SELECTION PROCESS

Students apply to be on the boards. Some communities have students indicate the top three boards they'd like to join. Committees vote and pick students for their committee. Some applications ask for personal statements that reveal interests so that staff can direct applicants to the best fitting boards. One place said if students make the effort to fill out the forms, they will find a place for them.

## ROLE ON BOARDS

All five of the municipalities interviewed have parks boards, and two have transportation or multi-modal boards. Parks and recreation boards

can introduce youth to issues and opportunities for shared public spaces and accessibility. Additionally, transportation boards, particularly multi-modal boards, are a good fit for youth because of the direct impact on their daily lives. Moreover, youth representation on boards that relate to transportation and placemaking is a method to institutionalize their involvement in these issues.

For all five cities, youth are in non-voting positions, but youth typically participate fully in discussions, contribute to setting meeting agendas, give input before a vote, and can provide public comment at council meetings. They serve one-to-two-year terms with one city allowing up to four years. Typically, youth are not on all committees. Some places exclude ones that cover sensitive topics or are topics that are technical.

Students have led coordination of events and helped with marketing and communication using their social platforms. One city noted youth's value for their education committee. Students bring forward what is happening at the schools so that the committee can provide support.

Tukwila, WA has both youth representation on boards and a separate teen program, Teens for Tukwila, with members that have interest in learning more about government functions. Students go to Olympia, the state capitol, each year to experience state government and in 2020 they attended a National League of Cities event in Washington, DC with city council members.

## CHALLENGES

Recruiting the right students and providing meaningful engagement can overcome many of the challenges places face. One warned about resistance from city staff and youth not being taken seriously.

Several places mentioned that many of the youth applicants are already very involved and busy. Students are less flexible for specially called meetings – they have volunteer, sports, and other extracurricular activities already filling their schedules. One city noted "We don't have an attendance policy for them like we do for voting members." Not having an attendance policy can also backfire, meaning that sometimes students only show up for the first meeting(s) and then don't return, which then takes away a spot from someone else who could be more committed/interested.

To further address issues of attendance, Edina, MN advocates for building the engagement into the students' day instead of asking them to add something to their schedule, which could conflict with other commitments. Some students are interested in topics, but the meetings are in the evenings, making it difficult for them to participate. Edina is thinking about organizing a spin-off meeting at the high school during lunch.

Another barrier to active participation occurs when students find government intimidating. Edina also sought to overcome this by providing orientation for students including Government 101; who's who in city government; meeting packets; and Robert's Rules of Order along with introductions to the staff liaisons for the different boards.

Youth are growing a lot in these situations and mentorship is key. They need to be valued for their input but have a safety net to catch them if they struggle. One site talked about doing a mentor program to pair each youth with an adult committee member. They also ask committee chairs to engage youth members by directly asking for student perspective during meetings.

## Compensation

None of the five programs provide stipends. However, the youth can claim public service hours, may receive letters of recommendations, and can include the experience to their resumes. As a separate initiative, the City of Tukwila has a scholarship offering up to \$5,000. They also created a paid youth intern program so each department can have an intern, sometimes two, working in the summer.

## MOVING FORWARD

The five communities featured in this brief found that including youth on their boards is an excellent way to demonstrate community commitment to youth—valuing their input and their help to build the communities that youth will inherit. These places encountered challenges but saw a lot of benefits in what they were doing. Two keys to success were effective marketing and deliberate engagement. Moreover, youth expressed connections with transportation issues, and transportation-related boards were popular with youth participants.

Our scan of youth participation focused on local government boards that have had youth participation for at least five years. However, there are new boards and commissions forming in municipalities that give evidence of continued interest. For example, the City of Bella Vista, Arkansas created an Active Transportation Advisory Board in 2024 with two youth positions and seven positions for general members. The city's news release noted that including youth was logical because the boards are discussing issues that impact them.<sup>1</sup>

Transportation professionals, city staff and others should consider what their communities are currently doing to engage youth, whether youth representation on boards might be a beneficial strategy, and, more specifically, how youth can and should have a voice in important transportation issues in their communities.



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<sup>1</sup> City of Bella Vista, AR. (2023). *City seeking members for new Active Transportation Advisory Board*. [https://www.bellavistaar.gov/news\\_detail\\_T2\\_R137.php](https://www.bellavistaar.gov/news_detail_T2_R137.php)